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## Benefits Forgot

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BOOKS BY G. B. Stern

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PANTOMIME

SEE-SAW

TWOS AND THREES

GRAND CHAIN

A MARRYING MAN

CHILDREN OF NO MAN'S LAND

*(Published in America under the title:  
"DEBATABLE GROUND")*

LARRY MUNRO

*(Published in America under the title:  
"THE CHINA SHOP")*

THE ROOM

THE BACK SEAT

SMOKE RINGS (SHORT STORIES)

TENTS OF ISRAEL

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THUNDERSTORM

A DEPUTY WAS KING

THE DARK GENTLEMAN

BOUQUET (BELLES-LETTRES)

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THE UGLY DACHSHUND

THE WOMAN IN THE HALL

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THE YOUNG MATRIARCH

THE REASONABLE SHORES

NO SON OF MINE

MONOGRAM (BELLES-LETTRES)

ANOTHER PART OF THE FOREST  
(BELLES-LETTRES)

TRUMPET VOLUNTARY (BELLES-LET-  
TRES)

BENEFITS FORGOT (BELLES-LETTRES)

# Benefits Forgotten

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G. B. STERN

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THE MACMILLAN COMPANY • NEW YORK

1949

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PRINTED IN THE UNITED STATES OF AMERICA

*First Printing*

## ACKNOWLEDGEMENTS

The Author and Publishers wish to express their indebtedness to the following for permission to include in this book passages from works in which they hold the copyright.

Mrs. George Bambridge: "The Absent-Minded Beggar" from *Rudyard Kipling's Verse*, on p. 100 of this volume (acknowledgement also to Doubleday & Company, Inc.); Messrs. Basil Blackwell & Mott Ltd.: *The Brontës: Their Lives, Friendships and Correspondence*, two letters on pp. 247 and 248; The Macmillan Company: *The Problem of Pain* by C. S. Lewis, on pp. 57 and 271 and *George Macdonald: An Anthology* on pp. 57 and 58; Lord Brabourne and Edward Rice, Esq.: Lady Knatchbull's letter to her sister, on p. 242; Coward-McCann Inc.: *Our Town* by Thornton Wilder on pp. 275-76; Doubleday & Company, Inc. and the Executrix of G. K. Chesterton: *St. Francis of Assisi* by G. K. Chesterton, on pp. 273 and 275; Messrs. John Lane, The Bodley Head: *Orthodoxy* by G. K. Chesterton, on pp. 37, 56 and 79; Charles Scribner's Sons: *Mary Rose* by James M. Barrie, on p. 80, *The Wind in the Willows* by Kenneth Grahame, on p. 85, *R. L. S. and His Sine Qua Non* by Adelaide Boodle, on p. 89; Miss Edna St. Vincent Millay: the poem "Inland" by her, on p. 65 (acknowledgement also to Harper & Brothers); the Oxford University Press (acknowledgement also to the poet's family): "In Praise of Pied Beauty" by Gerard Manley Hopkins, on p. 39; G. B. Shaw: *Heartbreak House*, on p. 113 and *St. Joan*, on p. 197; Henry Holt & Company: "A Shropshire Lad" by A. E. Housman, on p. 25; the Proprietors of the *Strand Magazine*: the article on Broadstairs by G. B. Stern, on p. 228; The Times Publishing Co. Ltd.: article in *The Times Literary Supplement* by "Menander," on p. 245; the Rt. Rev. the Bishop of Truro: Canon Doble's translation, *The Life of St. Nectan*, on p. 46; Little, Brown & Co.: "On the Coast of Coromandel" from *England Reclaimed and Other Poems* by Osbert Sitwell, on p. 69.





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## CHAPTER I "Sheep May Safely Graze"

A little cross man and his wife stood staring at the present a friend had sent him: half-a-dozen bottles of whisky, as dazzling a sight as you could see ranged on your Christmas table during the restricted post-war years: "Look at this stupid present from old Jones," remarked the little man peevishly; "he knows perfectly well I haven't got a corkscrew."

This Crazy Cartoon represents perfectly the very Height of Ingratitude; therefore, with gratitude for my theme song, I have chosen it to begin this book. For ingratitude, as here, is usually a matter of our sense of proportion lost or gone awry; while acknowledgment of benefits forgot and once more remembered may be that same delicate sense tilted back to rectitude and again in working order.

Shakespeare cried out appalled, and still rather touchingly surprised whenever he encountered ingratitude, "More strong than traitor's arms." (So do I, but one had better add that with that, any close resemblance ceases.) Most of all, he counted it a disaster to meet it in himself. These authoritative statements are, of course, guesswork; even scholarship allows us to guess over Shakespeare; for as we discover that everything contained in him has been somewhere hidden in ourselves and springs up at his word in amazed confirmation, it is not unnatural to suppose also that every small matter we may ever have felt and not succeeded in expressing could easily have been thought and felt by Shakespeare himself, and whole worlds more. Therefore, as I keep on about ingratitude every time I suddenly suspect a verdict of Guilty but Not Proven against myself, I have an idea that he too

## 2 BENEFITS FORGOT

could not help referring most frequently and in harshest condemnation where he might have had the same uncomfortable feeling that in this special region he was not so hot himself. It is a theory I first worked out tentatively (afraid at any moment that a Shakespearian expert might leap out from the bushes and prove me wrong) by the recurrence in his plays of forgiving daughters suffering from hot-tempered and unreasonable fathers. In *Another Part of the Forest* I conjectured that in this inverted fashion—for writers have odd ways—Shakespeare was doing open penance for his own treatment of his daughters Susannah and Judith. Arguing that thus always he most bitterly chided his failings where he most needed to draw relief, I deduced that unthankfulness was bothering him not a little when he condemned it as sharper than a serpent's tooth, and when of the freezing winter sky he wrote with passion: "Thou dost not bite so nigh, as benefits forgot."

In his first verse of that same song, an odd debatable line occurs:

Blow, blow thou winter wind,  
Thou art not so unkind,  
As man's ingratitude;  
Thy tooth is not so keen  
Because thou art not seen—

Why, I wonder, does he say the wind is not so keen, because (unlike ingratitude) it is not seen? *Neither* is seen, only their results; the invisible wind tosses the tree branches; and ingratitude, equally a shapeless abstraction, stirs and tosses the luckless heart. . . .

Not that gratitude can ever be forced. It has to well up spontaneously; far from coinciding with the fretful exactions of those who complain that they have given lavishly and not been thanked enough—"The things I've done for that girl!"). The word has deteriorated into wishy-washy associations, vulnerable to attack by a school of complacent debunkers who say it all boils down to sentimental weakness. But it once had a finer and more un-

yielding quality, before it was assailed by the fundamental instinct in human beings, which is to dislike having to be grateful because it fidgets their vanity, takes away from their sense of importance. Arrogance would like always to be the benefactor, and will not see that it is not only more gracious and blessed to receive well than to give, but also infinitely more difficult. Chesterton says of St. Francis of Assisi: "He was above all things a great giver; and he cared chiefly for the best kind of giving which is called thanks giving."

Thanksgiving . . . for things reassuringly familiar and marvellously strange; for hospitality appearing unasked at a crucial hour; for affection that still can care as warmly that justice should be done out as at home; gratitude to the people who have come to the rescue of someone we loved when we were ourselves for some reason incapable; to those who endured unpleasant scenes and weariness for our sake; to those who genuinely forget we have done them an injury; to those who contrive, where possible, to shelter us from bad news, instead of running round with it, delighted and solicitous.

And if we do not try ungenerously to check it, gratitude flashes forth in a glorious torrent, for what we are *spared* as well as for what we are given: the wounding reminders held back; the silence that is never reproachful, but like coolness and shade on a blazing day; our blunders swiftly, unobtrusively covered; horrors that came near and nearer, then receded; danger averted by a splinter's breadth, the breadth of the Straits of Dover. . . .

I believe I would reckon my three "favourite" virtues as gratitude, courtesy, and mental honesty; virtues that naturally cannot aspire to a place beside Faith, Hope, and Charity, though it is possible that Faith, Hope, and Charity will be found to contain them. Mental honesty may include the disconcerting grace of being able to catch oneself out in dishonesty. A man may steal spoons and still be aware in his soul of the gesture of gratitude, and practise it. Nor can the advocate of it-all-boils-down-to-this dismiss courtesy as a surface pattern of pretty manners and

formal arabesques; it shows a thousand curves more delicate and more faithful, and one, especially, in the direction of never disappointing any human soul who looks forward in eager excitement to a happiness you and no other can give him. I have heard sentimentalists remark: "You must never disappoint a *child*"—but why not remember that none of us is finally adult and immune? Disappointment must always be cruel; it need not also be cruelty.

It was at this stage, inclined to discourse in a leisurely and somewhat sententious fashion on the subject of gratitude, and the dangers of becoming too lenient with oneself, and the mind of Shakespeare, and maybe approaching by easy stages the parable of the Ten Lepers, of whom only one who returned to give thanks . . . it was at this stage that Pat pulled me up short by a musing reminder of when she had discovered in me this curious pre-occupation (source unknown) with thankfulness and giving thanks, this King Charles's Head about gratitude, and had then remarked how it branched like a vein through so many of my opinions, judgments, preferences, and quotations. I admitted with a touch of ruefulness (for we all prefer to find out things about ourselves rather than have other people rummage too freely—and too successfully—in our subconscious) that maybe she was right, and that I had been previously to a certain extent unaware of it. This, you will grant, was handsome as far as it went, and I thought it went far enough. So when she passed on to a preposterous claim that it was she again who had picked out "benefits forgot" during one of my monologues on Shakespeare (complete with recitations from his works, and *most* interesting!) and had suggested this would be a more fitting title for the book I was planning to write than the one I had already chosen, my indignation broke out into schoolgirl phrases, flatly contradicting her:

"But look here, *you* didn't; it wasn't you; it was me; I thought of 'benefits forgot,' not you; I said, 'There's my title!'"

"You've forgotten." Pat spoke with such calm sureness com-

pared with my vehemence, that it began to look as though perhaps she were right; she is no liar (not more than the rest of us), and only an out-and-out liar would take credit for supplying what she had not supplied. Nevertheless, my mind remained queerly, obstinately blank, refusing to corroborate the service she had done me, so that my belated "Thank you" may have sounded a little limp and perfunctory.

"And your theme is going to be gratitude!" Pat's ironic stress was not unjustified, indicating that in spite of all my grave pronouncements, I had made a fairly bad start.

*Who is Sylvia?* what is she? one's readers are inclined to ask, exasperated by the use of Christian names in volumes (not only mine) of memoir and autobiography. I might as well attempt to clear up the matter early, and if necessary make my apologia, before I go on to talk about a certain day which would lose its character if it did not contain "Kate" and "Bobby" and "Robin," as well as myself. *Who are* these good companions, and why are we not told more about them, if they have to be mentioned at all?

It is true that the glib use of Christian names scattered down the pages looks rather wilfully off-hand; even at times as though you were parading your intimacy with well-known people, if these happen to be not alone a noncommittal John or Willie, but Rebecca or Beverly or Lynnan Alfred (as Kipling in "The Brushwood Boy" let the child choose "Anniean Louise" as being the two finest names he had ever heard).

Yet various incidents in one's life would be pointless, presented as though one were a solo performer. Surely one need not append the extra player's irrelevant life-story every time? Irrelevant sounds patronizing; I mean, of course, irrelevant to the incident, though madly relevant to themselves at every moment of the day and night. As a reader as well as a writer, I grant genuine irritation; but would the author be less irritating if he let the rest of the company be anonymous? "a friend of mine," "a friend of a friend of mine," "my best friend," "my hearer," "the other person



present," "a certain stout party." P. G. Wodehouse devised an ingenious method, in his Mr. Mulliner books, of referring to each individual present in the pub as a sort of symbolic figure: "Gin-and-Ginger-Ale sitting in a corner," "The Draught Stout shook his head," "The Double-Whiskey-and-Splash admitted that these things were very mysterious," "a flushed Lemon Squash and a scowling Tankard of Ale who had fallen foul of one another" . . . but some of one's more abstemious friends might not altogether relish being referred to, for instance, as "Whisky Sour"; exchanging Wodehouse for *Everyman*, they might modestly prefer to figure as Good Deeds. And, alternatively, to use the surname in full might look even more like careless swank, though obviously ninety-nine times in a hundred the writer is innocent of such intention, and merely as a matter of course mixes with those of his own particular "shop." I give it up! There is no idiom which will not aggravate somebody; I can only hope that by some blessing not under my control, these friends of mine, where they have to appear, will seem neither more nor less life-size than characters in fiction.

\* \* \*

I had often stayed with Kate and Bobby and Robin at their seaside house, before the war. It stands on the strip of southeast coast between Dover and Folkestone, facing the Channel with only a low sea-wall between. But this was the first time for five years that we had been allowed to go back to Sandcroft, because for five years it had not been known as Sandcroft, but officially and impressively as H.M.S. Dungeness.

When the four of us met at Charing Cross, we were a little *over-bright*; for the week-end weather forecast in the papers lay among us like a dead body, carefully ignored as we stepped to and fro across it: fog; low-lying cloud; drizzle. It's just as well with miracles "to lie low and say nuffin" until you are quite sure. When it was fully established that we were to arrive in a flood of mellow sunshine streaming from a blue sky, then we burst out

triumphantly: "I say, *did* you see the weather forecast?" For it was already late October, and we had had three brief summers during the fall, and no summer during the summer.

When you see a well-beloved home again which you have not seen for years, you shout a superfluous: "Look, there it is!" Sandcroft was there all right, a pleasant, modern, roomy house in red brick. I ran straight up to my room. I had always been fond of it, chiefly for the glorious view and for a sort of trim, salty, sea-faring feeling about the curtains, which were blue and white cotton with a twisted pattern of knots and cables; to get them now is more impossible than any fairy-tale; you cannot go into a shop and demand five yards of printed cotton—"blue—no, not *that* blue; bluer; no, not just any old rope pattern, the rope has to be in *knots*"—because if you did, you would be sent straight to the nearest loony-bin.

The cotton curtains were still there, very faded; and the nautical feeling was still there. . . . I hope the admiral commanding Pluto and D-day Naval Operations had felt nautical too. For he had slept in this room.

Pluto. I looked out of the window . . . and there was Pluto itself, or a piece of Pluto, like a giant reel of cotton with pipeline wound up on it. And not only Pluto, but a bit of grounded Mulberry a short way out to sea; and the broken-down half of a jetty islanded from the beach; and, littering the sea-road, hundreds of derelict gun emplacements; great rolls of barbed wire; cranes and engines and concrete blocks; piled-up wood and iron spikes; notice-boards stating that no Unauthorized Person might pass beyond here, and that even authorized, it was death to smoke: grim implication, rather marred by the fact the boards were lop-sided and lately scribbled over by jolly little boys. No use pretending that the immediate prospect from Sandcroft was not a splendid mess; as though directly the war ended, the heroic tenants had departed, saying lightly to the second housemaid: "Look here, *you* tidy up all this!" And she had done a bit and said: "Oh, that'll do," and gone too. . . .

"If seven maids with seven mops  
Swept it for half a year,  
Do you suppose," the Walrus said,  
"That they could get it clear?"  
"I doubt it," said the Carpenter . . .

Yet oddly, when Robin and I were sitting a few hours later on the stone wall, munching pears, surrounded by all this haphazard evidence that there had been quite a war, we shed no bitter tear; on the contrary, we had never before been so moved by the beauty of this special stretch of seashore—not in spite of the litter, but because of it. In places farther away, without these sinister reminders, beauty went unchallenged; but here and now, with fragments of Pluto and Mulberry and barbed wire scrawling their ugly messages against air and sky, all mixed up with the sunshine dabbled on the slanting line of waves as the tide flowed in from the other side, from the opposite shore—here and now we did suddenly realize, by the bladed edge of contrast, that we were at peace. For Hitler's West Wall was so incredibly near that we could almost see it; so near that the enemy could almost have leaned forward and touched England. Almost. The cross-Channel guns must have sounded very loud on the strip of beach outside H.M.S. Dungeness.

That night, with no more fear of defying the black-out, I pulled aside the nautical curtains and saw the lighthouse flash; saw the awakened coast, recently muffled and shamming dead, glitter in a luminous chain from Dungeness to Dover.

Nevertheless, Sandcroft was not yet wholly normal and sensible. On what had been the lawn of the neighbouring house, a white pedigree bull was strolling about untethered. He ambled up to the fence when he saw us and enquired, more or less, if we could give him a sandwich? The ship's cat left by the Navy, having for the most womanly reason refused to accompany them when they quitted Sandcroft, had brought up her Persian kittens wild on the waste land between the tangled gardens and the deserted golf links, where she foraged for whatever she could

find for them. Mother-wit in war-time—See her tense and crouching, on the look-out for rabbits. We decided to bring into the house two of these Ishmael kittens and try to tame them. "Butter their paws," suggested Robin, with pretty faith in the old superstition, and forgetting for a moment—until Kate and Bobby and I turned on him aghast: "*Butter* their paws? Are you mad? *Butter* their paws! Use—our—weekly—butter—on—a-kitten's—paws?"

So that evening those two jungle kittens darted about the drawing room, while we played at a somewhat less strenuous game of our own: one of us went over to the book-shelves lining the walls and read out a quotation from a volume chosen at random. The others had to guess from where it came. I began by reading a paragraph from Robin's own book: *Come to Dust*, his war diary written in hospital after he had been wounded in a tank attack during the Middle East campaign. Robin admired the quotation but genuinely had not the remotest notion what author was responsible for those pungent, telling phrases. Bobby's choice proved to be from the *Odyssey*, the return of the warriors after ten weary years of the Trojan War. He had meant to read from the English translation, but his eyes had strayed to the opposite page and, involuntarily, he read aloud the passage in Greek. Instead of shouting him down, we, who understood not one word of it, asked him to go on and on, exhilarated by the rhythm and sound, which were like the slanting line of waves as the tide flowed in from the other side, the opposite shore. The *Odyssey*, not unnaturally, led us to Ulysses and thence to Tennyson, and I quoted two or three lines of "The Revenge" without bothering to go to the book-shelves. And the others exclaimed unwisely: "Your memory, Peter!" and then wished they had refrained, for I proceeded to give them the whole of "The Revenge," which was also not inappropriate to our own times of war and noble admirals. That tough old sea-dog, Sir Richard Grenville, who never knew when he was beaten, spoke as Churchill might have spoken, had indeed spoken again and again in robust scorn of danger to the out-numbered:

"We have fought such a fight for a day and a night  
As may never be fought again!  
We have won great glory, my men!  
And a day less or more  
At sea or ashore,  
We die—does it matter when?"

I imagine that every now and then we may all have had experience of a day or a group of days when everything that happens, everything spoken and read, instead of being, as usual, a lot of isolated fragments jangled together in a bag, seems instead to be linked by intention into a delight of orderly coherence. Gradually, we were all four becoming aware that we had dropped into one of these essentially reasonable times.

So on the next afternoon Kate and I went off on a leisurely drive in the lazy sunshine to nowhere in particular; we had been needing it badly after those restricted years when every available drop of petrol was only permitted for urgencies: to get to the station when there was no other route; to get in supplies when there were no nearer shops. Kate had saved up her basic ration, and now we drove indolently and for pleasure alone, relaxed into a mood of forgotten contentment, along the roads that wound through the Romney marshes.

Five large American airfields had stood on these marshes. From between the dykes of quiet and beautiful meadows, American airmen had gone up night and day to give fighter cover, especially during the vital period of the D-day operations and after. Train-busting was their special party piece. Because of these airfields, and because of Pluto and the Mulberry harbours on this section of the coast, the Germans not unnaturally took it for granted that the dreaded invasion would be at Boulogne or Dieppe, more or less opposite, and prepared accordingly. Certainly they never dreamed that the plan was to tow the Mulberry harbours all the way towards a landing in Normandy. Kate told me that David, her son, had been stationed not far off, awaiting orders for D-day, and had seen at one incredible dawn about nine hundred ships

pass down the Channel . . . and knew that now there would be only a short lapse of time before he himself went over to the occupied countries.

I said "now" for D-day. We had gone right through that amazing "now"; and on this tender mellow day of "now" in October, 1945, no traces were left of the five American airfields, alert and humming as they had been then, on the eve of high adventure; no traces except a few bits of camouflage scattered on the quiet grass. "Sheep may safely graze." . . . You remember Bach's chorale? From their appearance, the sheep of Kent seem to have got the idea quicker than the ship's cat; not a nervous breakdown among them. On the further side of the stream, bordered with flaming berries reflected in the water, a little black moorhen paddled up and down, ruffling the mirrored clouds. Small, sturdy grey churches could be seen here and there, miles across the level pastures. But no human figures were in sight, though in the villages we had driven through they were pottering round happily on this Saturday afternoon, looking for all the world as though nothing worth mentioning had happened for a thousand years; nothing, that is, to stir the blood; one or two local items of news, such as twenty-two German prisoners caught single-handed in a village store by an old woman of seventy-five. . . .

Presently Kate slid the car to a standstill. After a pause, she mused aloud: "All this rather brings it home, doesn't it?"

And I answered: "I suppose, really, even since the end of the war, we haven't had much time for gratitude."

Mind, I knew well enough that there could always be a time for gratitude; but it was true that our everyday life had been so cluttered with obstructions and frustrations and delays, a perpetual obstacle race never won, but beginning with every fresh day, as to blunt our sharp awareness that Plutos and Mulberries and barbed wire and airfields were no more in active deadly use; that sheep might safely graze. . . .

Mulberry and Pluto had gone for awhile, perhaps forever, to join the Cinque Ports and the Martello towers in history's ro-

mantic retrospect of old powerless invasions, and rumours of invasion, and invasion fought back, and deliverance from invasion: Napoleon, might he land at any moment on this strip of England? Not he; the Martellos will keep him away. And there they stand, funny little squat round fortresses. And older still, the Cinque Ports, maritime towns dating from the Norman Conquest: "The duty of the Cinque Ports until the reign of Henry VII was to furnish all the ships and men that were needful for the King's Service"—Romney, Sandwich, Hastings, Hythe, and Dover (Canada, Australia, New Zealand, South Africa, and India "... the pleasure of the Dominions to furnish all the ships and men needful for the King's Service").

And presently we were dawdling down the wide tree-shaded street of New Romney, whose parvenu adjective had been added in the eleventh century.

We halted at the Church of St. Nicholas and, with a strange sense of expectation, went in, looked at the faded, tattered banners on the walls, looked at the page where the huge Bible happened to be open on the lectern. . . .

I swear to you that if ever I was honest, I am being honest now; it would have been too easy to fake a significant passage to accord with our enchanted period of relevance. For the Bible was turned back at Chapter 3 of Ecclesiastes:

To every thing there is a season, and a time to every purpose under the heaven:

A time to be born, and a time to die; a time to plant, and a time to pluck up that which is planted;

A time to kill, and a time to heal; a time to break down, and a time to build up;

A time to weep, and a time to laugh; a time to mourn, and a time to dance . . .

A time to love, and a time to hate; a time of war, and a time of peace.

## CHAPTER II "A Time to Heal"

Not directly after V-E day, but at scattered moments through the months and even years that followed, one was suddenly struck into new and brilliant happiness by the uncurtained windows at dusk and in darkness, warm squares of orange printed in parallel rows on a shadowy street the whole way down, so that it looked a little unreal, like a street in harlequinade. And we thought: How lovely; we can see in again; they can see out. For tearing down the black-out was at first no more than a gesture of jubilant celebration; we took it as our defiant right not to be muffled by those unbearable safety measures the instant they no longer stood for safety. Not till later on did we pause and be thankful. One cannot, I suppose, be always remembering; yet, still, when a plane passes overhead, how satisfying again and again to make the same feeble joke: "Is it one of ours?"

It might have been any time after the official end of the war that, searching for a valuable two-coupon pair of gloves I had mislaid, I started rummaging in the dark cupboard in the hall, and in the narrow beam of light from my torch, I saw a bulky morocco zippered bag jammed back among a lot of miscellaneous objects. "Good Lord!" I exclaimed, "I'd forgotten *you*!" For it was my air-raid shelter emergency bag, packed during the summer of 1940 for what we were to call later "the ordinary raids," or "the old-fashioned raids," or when even somewhat superciliously we said: "When there were proper raids," with an inflexion that cast a slur on the scutcheon of those more up-to-date VI's and V2's.

The evening paper had just reminded me, under the Ulyssean headline "No More Sirens," that "the whole warning system in



Britain was discontinued from mid-day yesterday"; followed by a pleasant little anecdote of a man washing a wall and leaning on the switch by accident, to the discomfort of the whole locality. High time, therefore, that my emergency air-raid bag should also, so to speak, be demobilized. So I lugged it out from the depths of the cupboard and, swaying beneath its weight, carried it into the dining-room and set it triumphantly upon the table, this once elegant affair with its pale, biscuit-coloured lining of corded silk; souvenir built for travel to the south of France, to California, to Vienna, and Budapest (interval for heartbroken strains of a waltz called, I think, "Irony"), while I tugged at the zipper, which was a bit rusty from disuse.

When I succeeded in pulling it back, the sides burst gladly apart, gaping wide, reminding me how difficult it was in 1940 to thrust inside every single thing that might be needed. . . .

Alter the tense: *That might have been needed.*

Month after month and year after year until April, 1945, as though watching a slow-motion film, we had had to possess our souls in patience. To possess one's soul in anything is not so easy as it sounds. The last three weeks, however, had pitched us head-long into a helter-skelter of events too swift for us to realize their full import. Dazed and breathless and more than a little overstrained and over-tired, we heard of the ignominious end of Mussolini; of the American and Russian link-up in Germany; Hitler is dead, we heard; Goebbels commits suicide; fall of Berlin; Himmler offers the Allies surrender terms; fall of Milan and Turin; fall of Munich; fall of Venice; complete surrender of German army in Italy; fall of Hamburg, re-capture of Rangoon; surrender of German army in Denmark, Holland, and northwest Germany. . . .

Drama was overdoing its effects; we repeated the items of news to one another like a schoolmaster constantly prodding the slothful bodies of a class of torpid scholars: "Do you hear? Do you understand what it all means? Wake up! Be excited! Be thrilled! Marvell Rejoice!"

. . . I began to pull forth the contents of my air-raid bag.

Finally, after it was empty, and the room reeking of disinfectant, an array of objects covered the table that by sheer implication of horror made it seem utterly incredible that all over England at our period of direct jeopardy, equipment of this nature had been assembled and packed in quite a matter-of-fact spirit of practical forethought: "Let me see, what am I likely to want?"—as though arranging an evening hand-bag for theatre and supper-party, with mirror, powder-puff, lipstick, latchkey.

Perhaps it is an understatement to say the contents were what I had once heard called "*too* utterly macabber!" Roughly speaking, they listed themselves as follows: the Sinister Section, setting imagination at the gallop; the Healing Section, reassuring, gentle, and kindly; the Make-a-Cosy-Home-in-the-Shelter Section, a highly personal assortment; and a small but precious Loot Section, of things grown rare since being buried in the bag.

There were, however, gaps; and memory soon began to accuse me, not without reason, of having on occasion stolen from myself *for* myself, before I was entitled to. Come now, where is the torch and extra battery? the brandy flask? the cotton wool? the box of matches? Guilty or not guilty? Well . . . I meant to replace them.

Here, briefly, is the hard-boiled catalogue, that even Ophelia might be puzzled how to turn to favour and to prettiness:

Rolls of sterilized gauze, safety-pins, pain-deadening drugs, hydrogen peroxide, various acrid solutions, iodine, boric acid, zinc, plaster, anti-gas ointment ("You wait; that there Hitler, he'll turn nasty at the end!"); stuff for burns; Eusol; Dettol; tweezers; enamel dishes both round and kidney-shaped, and a pair of surgical scissors. I should explain that a friend who was a nurse had been living with me while she worked in London during the war, and had helped me pack the bag, which accounts for its professional thoroughness. She knew she might be called upon at any moment for any of these items. Then followed my individual wants: a cork to bite on when a near bomb burst (it prevented

something horrid, I forget what); a bottle of water, a medicine glass, extra socks, stockings, a box of wax Quiés to stuff in my ears so that the drums should not burst (no, indeed; that would be a pity); night-lights; a bottle of sal volatile; and at the heart and centre of all these delicious trifles, a copy of *Little Women*.

It may be that for each one of us some small individual signal was to bring awakening, with a sick lurch in that highly susceptible region at the pit of the stomach, on realization of what we had barely escaped; to me it was rammed home at last by the belated discovery and unpacking of this bag.

If morning skies,  
Books, and my food, and summer rain  
Knocked on my sullen heart in vain . . .  
Lord, thy most pointed pleasure take,  
And stab my spirit broad awake.

Pointed enough . . . though pleasure was not exactly to be associated with anti-gas ointment, tweezers, kidney-shaped enamel dishes, iodine and bandages and pain-deadeners. Can you wonder that thanksgiving, long overdue, poured into my heart like a cataract? Why—it's *over*; really over; I am awake now. It is over, all that part of it. We shall not need any of these things, after all.

Never can we forget the quality of the people in the front-line cities, what they did, what they endured, and how they met the test; their stubborn courage, their rueful humour; but we may forget now the nightmare assembly of our first-aid preparations. Bundle them back in the bag, back into the dark cupboard.

Cinders of London . . . cinders of Troy. As a slight apology for using my season ticket into a past still a little too recent for detachment, I present a letter which Thomas Nashe wrote to Sir Philip Sidney in such Elizabethan English that an attempt to translate his meaning into modern prose left me wondering afresh why Shakespeare was still so near and all the other sixteenth-century writers so far?

Thomas Nashe to Sir Philip Sidney, 1591.

Indeede, to say the truth, my stile is somewhat heauie gated, and cannot daunce, trip, and goe so lively, with oh! my love, ah! my love, all my loves gone, as other Sheepheards that have beene fooles in the Morris time out of minde; nor hath my prose any skill to imitate the Almond leape verse, or sit tabring five yeres together nothing but to bee, to hee, on a paper drum. Onely I can keepe pace with Gravesend barge, and care not if I have water enough to lande my ship of fooles with the Tearme (the tyde I shoulde say). Now every man is not of that minde; for some, to goe the lighter way, will take in their fraught of spangled feathers, golden Peebles, Straw, Reedes, Bulrushes, or any thing, and then they beare out their sayles as proudly as if they were balisted with Bulbiefte. *Others are so hardly bested for loading that they are faine to retaille the cinders of Troy, and the shivers of broken trunchions, to fill up their boats that else should goe empty;* and if they have but a pound of weight of good Merchandise, it shall be placed at the poepe, or pluckt in a thousand peeces to credit their carriage. For my part, every man as he likes, *Mens cuiusque is est quisque.* 'Tis as good to goe in cut fingered Pumps as corke shooes, if one were Cornish diamonds on his toes.

A scholar of the period would doubtless rebuke me for ignorance, when I could so easily study his annotations and acquire a stock of much-needed knowledge to replace my childish bewilderment. Childish? No, I am wrong; for children always do ask questions: What is "the Almond leape verse"? What is to "sit tabring . . . to bee, to hee, on a paper drum"? (the French for drum is *tambour*, but "to bee, to hee"—that gets me down). Where is the joke of "lande my ship of fooles with the Tearme (the tyde I shoulde say)"? "Balisted with Bulbiefte" spelt in that fashion brings nightingales to my fancy ("bulbul" in the East), but no doubt he meant bully beef? (Look it up, my girl, instead of speculating.) Finally, "'Tis as good to goe in cut fingered Pumps as corke shooes, if one were Cornish diamonds on his toes." In 1591 that proverb, I am sure, would be hailed as clear, witty, and succinct, with maybe a touch of irony: "Aha," one Elizabethan citizen in cut-fingered pumps might say, passing another in corke shooes, "Cornish diamonds to you, sirrah!" flinging a look of mocking contempt at the other's toes.

Yet it was this same Nashe who left us those lines, lucid as the splash of fountain water:

Brightness falls from the air,  
Queens have died young and fair.

Topicality is an odd beast. In the "Galoshes of Fortune" Hans Andersen let Councillor Knap slip on a pair and visit the past. Suppose an Elizabethan were to get hold of the Galoshes and seriously settle down to study a couple of Crazy Cartoons published daily in a series during our distresses of war. For instance, on July 25th, 1945, two waitresses in a restaurant consult about a most peculiar order from a customer waiting for his dinner: "This one wants bread and bread *and* bread." Or two men bathing, and one whispers to the other: "Don't look now, but isn't that our Income Tax man swimming up behind?" (But nobody was swimming up behind . . . except a shark!) What would a casual reader, not an earnest student, make of these incomprehensibilities, three or four hundred years hence? Both items of humour are flavoured with rue and bitters to a contemporary; but an impatient young voice speaking from the misty future might be heard saying: "Well, I don't see anything bitter about that; and as for being funny—!" Small wonder, then, that I fail to split my sides over the jesters in *Twelfth Night* who were no doubt marvellously topical at their moment of spouting such lines as: ". . . you are now sailed into the north of my lady's opinion; where you will hang like an icicle on a Dutchman's beard," and ". . . he does smile his face into more lines than are in the new map with the augmentation of the Indies," and:

Wherefore have these gifts a curtain before 'em? are they like to take dust, like Mistress Mall's picture? why dost thou not go to church in a galliard and come home in a coranto? My very walk should be a jig; I would not so much as make water but in a sink-a-pace.

A passage of Shakespearean dialogue, which he spaced with the snap and brevity of an early Noel Coward comedy, must be

shown in full to prove how sadly humour is a poor dependent on time:

*Seb.* Look, he's winding up the watch of his wit; by and by it will strike.

*Gon.* Sir,—

*Seb.* One: tell.

*Gon.* When every grief is entertain'd that's offer'd, Comes to the entertainer—

*Seb.* A dollar.

*Gon.* Dolour comes to him, indeed: you have spoken truer than you purposed.

*Seb.* You have taken it wiselier than I meant you should.

*Gon.* Therefore, my lord,—

*Ant.* Fie, what a spendthrift is he of his tongue!

*Alon.* I prithee, spare.

*Gon.* Well, I have done: but yet,—

*Seb.* He will be talking.

*Ant.* Which, of he or Adrian, for a good wager, first begins to crow?

*Seb.* The old cock.

*Ant.* The cockerel.

*Seb.* Done. The wager?

*Ant.* A laughter.

*Seb.* A match!

*Ant.* If but one of his pockets could speak, would it not say he lies?

*Seb.* Ay, or very falsely pocket up his report.

*Gon.* Methinks our garments are now as fresh as when we put them on first in Afric, at the marriage of the king's fair daughter Claribel to the King of Tunis.

*Seb.* 'Twas a sweet marriage, and we prosper well in our return.

*Adr.* Tunis was never graced before with such a paragon to their queen.

*Gon.* Not since widow Dido's time.

*Ant.* Widow! a pox o' that! How came that widow in? Widow Dido!

*Seb.* What if he had said 'widower Æneas' too? Good Lord, how you take it!

*Adr.* 'Widow Dido,' said you? you make me study of that: she was of Carthage, not of Tunis.

*Gon.* This Tunis, sir, was Carthage.

*Adr.* Carthage?

*Gon.* I assure you, Carthage.

*Seb.* His word is more than the miraculous harp; he hath raised the wall and houses too.

Further on in *The Tempest*, Trinculo spouts a recognizable terror of our own yesterdays: “. . . yond same black cloud, yond huge one, looks like a foul bombard that would shed his liquor. If it should thunder as it did before, I know not where to hide my head!” And anon he observes our national character so shrewdly that we would be glad to know if the cut were received with good-temper by his audiences: “A strange fish! Were I in England now, as once I was, and had but this fish painted, not a holiday fool there but would give a piece of silver: there would this monster make a man; *any strange beast there makes a man.*”

It were honest to put on record that when I opened my Shakespeare to search for the most telling examples of obscurity, I lit upon Autolycus anticipating a ballad on the Loch Ness monster:

“Here’s another ballad of a fish, that appeared upon the coast on Wednesday the fourscore of April, forty thousand fathom above water, and sung this ballad against the hard hearts of maids: it was thought she was a woman and was turned into a cold fish for she would not exchange flesh with one that loved her. The ballad is very pitiful and as true.”

And Launcelot Gobbo was not too babbling a fool, after all, since we owe him the remark that it is a wise father that knows his own child. These three clowns, with Touchstone, have done my cause more harm than its slightness warranted; I understood every word they said.

The income-tax collector may be a shark, though personally I never see him at all in either fish or human likeness, merely as a collection of forms in buff envelopes with a repellent transparency let into them for my name and address. Yet though flesh and spirit must rebel at paying income-tax, they do not rebel nearly as vehemently as at paying almost everything else; because rightly or wrongly, I have an idea when I sign the cheque that I am

still helping to pay for the war (note the modesty of that "helping"; I wrote it first: "that I am still paying for the war"). And again, as when I emptied my shelter bag, an impulse of spontaneous gratitude gives memory a jog, back to the time when with millions of others I repeatedly whispered into the vibrating air: "Oh, God, keep them away *at any price*. Money's nothing, really. We're still *free*. We'll pay all we have for all the rest of our lives, only keep them out of England!" "Mighty little free about England now," the grumbling part of me replies, and with fair reason. Nevertheless, our land has remained untainted by enemy occupation; and the grumbling part of me might as well take an occasional backward look at certain benefits forgot, before they grow rusty.

Furiously to resent paying one thing, yet to remain phlegmatic over other obligations ten times as large, is a matter for individual reaction: that twitch of meanness and irritability when some devil in the house leaves on the electric light in the hall over-night; almost weeping with rage, we switch it off in the morning: "This is going to cost me *thousands* of pounds!" Or again, lending stamps might be our special antipathy: "Why can't whoever-it-is have stamps of their *own*?" Exasperation out of all proportion to its infinitesimal cause. And our special blind spots are even queerer to understand. Surely, we have all argued, casting motes like mad without so much as a glance at that infernal beam in our own eye, surely this friend of ours who is so quick, so intelligent, so sensitive, so generous-minded, cannot suddenly in that one place have thickened to such unbelievable density?

Years ago I wrote a play called *The Man Who Pays the Piper*, for which the management who put it on foretold an unparalleled success. As it was withdrawn after three nights, it is impossible to pretend that its success has not been somewhere paralleled or even exceeded. That my heart was broken is for the moment beside the point. What I wish to present is something concerning the theme of the play, which was on the point of view of an elder



sister, Daryll, towards her youngest sister, Fay. By the death of their father, Daryll became (certainly with no desire of her own) wage-earner and head of the family: a thoughtless, flippant, unhelpful, and extravagant family. She was (I thought) a darling and spoilt them all, but especially she spoilt young Fay. When the wage-earner, "Augustus Caesar," is a woman, she is nearly always bound to be unpopular in her home. That is human nature in its primitive revolt against dependence while doing nothing to remedy it. The situation inevitably led to a showdown between Daryll and Fay. It never struck me that there could be any question of *not* seeing Fay as an ungrateful little wretch. Daryll did not exact gratitude, nor even expect it; but once, just once in the play, it should have sprung up spontaneously, from decency, love, imagination.

So, of course, I was on Daryll's side. Yet with everybody I know (and for once "everybody" is a literal reckoning) I seem to have alighted full on a blind spot. The more I batter on this blind spot in passionate argument, the more dogmatically my opponent, male or female, retorts by accusing *me* of a blind spot in exactly that same place. Incredible they should not be won over to surrender and agreement. . . . If only I could, once and for all, get it off my chest (where it still lies heavy), make one convert, it would be enough to convince me that I in my sanity am not cut off from communication with a whole lunatic world.

"Getting It Off My Chest" might be a sub-title appropriate to the Ancient Mariner (who never, by the way, nicely thanked the Wedding Guest for listening). Were it off my chest, I could abandon certain sombre intentions to behave like Timon of Athens, a too impulsive fellow, though hospitable and generous to his friends. When they were led to believe he had lost all his money, they gave him the go-by. Disillusioned, Timon told them what he thought of them in somewhat too exact terms, and, reacting to the other extreme, went to live in a cave ("That'll punish 'em!") for the rest of his brief existence.

I wonder if Shakespeare was fond of Timon? I wonder whether

they said at the Mermaid, referring to Timon's pleasure-loving friends: "Oh, they're young, you know," with that well-known accent of indulgence for the puppy who is chewing another man's shoe (not your own). Yet gratitude is a quality of grace that surely becomes the young as well as the old, a fount of fresh water springing from the soil to give a greener life wherever it touches and flows. It is harsh and stingy not to give thanks, and why should youth, so rarely harsh and stingy, be granted a free permit to be either? But if only I could *see* my own blind spot, I would be rid of this peculiar sensation of having created a fable with characters twirled round and pointing in an opposite direction to what was intended as the moral.

La Fontaine might have been equally astonished that his fable of "La Cigale et la Fourmi" has turned itself inside-out, on a pronounced preference for the idler and parasite:

La Cigale, ayant chantée  
 Tout l'été  
 Se trouva fort depourvue  
 Quand la bise fût venue. . . .

Certainly the girl sang all through the summer, heedless of the approaching winter; certainly when winter came she had to go and ask for help from that beast the ant, who had toiled all through the summer with prudence and forethought; certainly we ought to countenance the self-righteous refusal of la Fourmi to do a damned thing for the cricket ("Vous avez chantée? Eh bien, dansez maintenant"). But there again, the wind of our approval bloweth where it listeth.

On looking through my own work, I appear to have plugged this theme in several different books, from different angles. I can spot Fay again at least four times, in three males and one female: Loveday and Danny and Ginger and Robert. I have not the faintest idea why, nor can I trace it to any submerged thwartings in my own early life (as Citizen Kane, not aware of it himself, suffered all his life from the loss of his beloved little sled Rose-

bud). Their special quality of insouciance, their capacity to accept and then pass on, whistling, must be somewhere or other resentfully lodged in my system, a sort of King Charles's Head. Nor is the enigma solved by consistent preferences; for if it is illogical for me to be wholeheartedly on the side of la Cigale as against la Fourmi, I had the greatest affection for Loveday and a passion for Robert; but I was indifferent to Danny, and positively disliked Fay and Ginger.

That tolerant and somewhat fatuous excuse, "Oh, they're young," is only really applicable to puppies and kittens, not to boys and girls. Nearly all the juvenile faults which are glossed over with sentimental indulgence can be perceived just as grievously in the adult, the middle-aged, and the old: thoughtlessness, impatience, restlessness—most middle-aged people are terribly restless, feeling that time is slipping by—rudeness. How often has one heard an elderly dame assert: "At my age I can speak my mind!"—and a very tiresome mind it usually is, far better left unspoken. Concede to youth temerity rather than the endurance learnt in a slower school, a desire for hazardous experiences rather than for experience, I yet see no reason why one need insult "the young" by expecting them to be ungrateful by nature—"They're really *rather* sweet"—as one expects a puppy to chew his master's slippers.

\* \* \*

God who created me  
Nimble and light of limb  
In three elements free  
To run, to ride, to swim:  
Not when the eye is dim.  
But now from the heart of joy,  
I would remember Him:  
Take the thanks of a boy.

It was many years before I read the second and third verses of Bishop Beeching's poem; and when at last I turned the page and saw it was not only a boy's thanks offered during a pause in his leap-frog exuberance, but passed on to the equal thankfulness

of maturity and old age, I was a little disappointed to find in a different form Browning's philosophy:

Grow old along with me!  
The best is yet to be,  
The last of life, for which the first was made;  
Our times are in His hand  
Who saith: "A whole I planned,  
Youth shows but half; trust God: see all, nor be afraid.

"Take the thanks of a boy" would be the first quotation, I think, to slip into my mind if I were idly collecting for an anthology of gratitude. It has that first up-rush of exhilaration from a spring of physical well-being; an unsubtle early-morning vitality, so eager in search of swift active ways to fulfil itself that it rarely stays long enough to be conscious of obligation: "They that wait upon the Lord shall renew their strength; they shall mount up with wings as eagles; they shall run, and not be weary; and they shall walk, and not faint." We toil and plod along far in the rear of such promises, hardly making any progress. . . . The craving grows unendurable, to mount up with wings (though, of course, it was never meant to be read literally), to run and not be weary. . . .

Once in the wind of morning\*  
I ranged the thymy wold;  
The world-wide air was azure  
And all the brooks ran gold.

There through the dews beside me  
Behold a youth that trod,  
With feathered cap on forehead,  
And poised a golden rod.

With gay regards of promise  
And sure unslackened stride  
And smiles and nothing spoken  
Led on my merry guide.

\* From "A Shropshire Lad" by A. E. Housman. Quoted by permission of Henry Holt & Company.

With lips that brim with laughter  
 But never once respond,  
 And feet that fly on feathers,  
 And serpent-circled wand.

Strange that most of *A Shropshire Lad* should sound so joyful, and echo so mournfully. Was Browning right, just now, and is there, after all, a missing peal among these bell-ringers who celebrate only youth and lusty delight?

Everyone suddenly burst out singing;  
 And I was filled with such delight  
 As prisoned birds must find in freedom  
 Winging wildly across the white  
 Orchards and dark green fields; on; on; and out of sight.

And it suddenly struck me that when we have reached a certain age, we never, never let our voices go and make a *noise*, with all the shouting and cheering pent up within us; never let it *rip*—When did I last open my lungs and, unembarrassed, make a noise for all I was worth, rending the stilly air? “Everyone suddenly burst out singing.” . . . Listen to the children when they play, in the stream, under the chestnuts; they shout all the time, whether they are so near as to touch one another, or just within earshot. Lucky little horrors! Well . . . I am forgetting my anthology.

. . . declare my thankfulness, in making apparent my willing minde to be commanded in any services of love, which you shall thinke fitt (though I want abilitie to performe great matters).

The Elizabethans excelled in pelting their patrons with blossoms of grateful eloquence, till we need to be reminded that the inarticulate are not necessarily more sincere than the false-sounding euphuist. I would gather and store with these lavishly beflowered arcades, the simplest of stories from Malory: the incident of Sir Launcelot when he healed Sir Urre of Hungary who an enchanter had affirmed would never be whole until the best

knight in the world had searched his wounds. When last of all they asked Sir Launcelot to try, he said: "Jesu defend me, for never was I able in worthiness to do so high a thing!" And after it had been given him to perform the miracle: "Sir Launcelot wept as he had been a child that had been beaten." When I first read this, I could hardly understand why he should have wept, but my thickness of spirit cleared into understanding that he had broken down into thankfulness beyond all speech, for this was a secret signal of pardon and absolution; until then, he had thought that for his sin with Guinevere, God would nevermore allow him the privilege to be His vehicle of healing.

Poetry and high prose. . . . Yet often a topical incident, a paragraph in a newspaper, can also prove a charming little illustration of that appreciative quality which seeks to leave a deposit beyond a mere letter of thanks: the underlying spirit of four Turks from the Ankara National Theatre who visited our Stratford Memorial Theatre, and were so grateful to the players that they entertained them with scenes from *Romeo and Juliet* in Turkish. They had the right idea of give and take among the nations of the world.

People fall easily into groups of natural takers and givers. Those who perpetually accept, not cumbered by pride or any other discomfort in the matter, can be written down in our simplest category of parasite, cadger, skinflint, and snapper-up of unconsidered trifles; never likely to be beloved of their fellow-men, they manage to get along by being so placidly unaware that they are always taking, never giving, that at least they excite our amusement. I have still to meet the man or woman *conscious* of meanness. They may say apologetically: "I have to be very careful, you know," as if thrift were not in their nature, but only in their circumstances; and it would serve no purpose to inform them that a natural giver in whatever circumstances, will act as though he had some secret source of abundance.

Those who give well usually find no trouble in accepting well; generosity works both ways. Yet there are givers who cannot

take, and who will not fit into any casual summing-up. While we benefit by their largesse, their way of standing treat without ostentation but as though it could not be otherwise, we cannot help wondering what is fundamentally wrong, to account for their obvious reluctance to receive gifts, to receive hospitality, to let the other man pay for a change? and more than reluctance, their positive discomfort, their inability to show pleasure or to utter words of thanks that are not churlish and unreal. They would like best to say straight out: "I wish to God you wouldn't give me things—I hate it!" They have none of that supple yielding, that falling into graceful folds, which dressmakers mean when they say a material has been cut on the cross. Always King Cophetua, even if they lack Cophetua's income and palaces, they feel that a moment of acceptance at once places them down with the beggar maids. Unlike the parasite contingent, I believe they recognise this failure in their natures, and hope by paradox that in giving more and more lavishly they will gradually become exempt from having to form those dread syllables of "Thanks ever so." I have also noticed about these people that when they have no option but to take a present, it invariably disappears as though it were an object of shame; neither used nor displayed, it sinks into the same oblivion as when you put sixpence into your overdraft.

Most of us are embarrassed when we are openly thanked; inspiring ourselves, now, the wriggling anguish of our childhood when aunts and mothers endlessly reminded us not to forget to say "Thank you for having me" or uttered a reproachful: "Darling, have I heard you *thank* Auntie Margaret properly for those lovely chalks?" (Well, I'm *using* the chalks; what more can she want?) Many an Aunt Margaret wishes indeed that parents would not confuse them with the extortionist who goes about the world in perpetual loud complaint of getting no thanks. "I don't expect it, of course, but you would think, wouldn't you? . . . Here's me slaving away, working my fingers to the bone. . . . Here's me never thinking of myself. . . . Here's me, giving away the very rags off my back, simply to give pleasure to others.

It's the way we're made, I suppose. But for sheer downright wicked ingratitude—"

Pamela once accused me of sheer downright wicked ingratitude for my cold response when she offered to give me one of her new photographs for Christmas. "Give it to me *at* Christmas," I said, merely altering the preposition. But then I honestly find it too difficult to work up raptures for a photograph, without betraying that a true foundation is missing from my raptures. What do you *do* with the things, unless you are a lover, when presumably you kiss them and keep them under your pillow? Irving Berlin, I believe, wrote a song with the refrain: "What'll I do with but a photograph to tell my troubles to?" What indeed? Yet I am grateful to our Victorian ancestors for not reacting as I do, for few objects are more entertaining than the family album. As a child I wallowed in our great amber velvet tome on the grand piano; noticing a curious fondness on the part of my mother and all her brothers and sisters and friends, in their youth, to get photographed in fancy-dress: A Persian Maid; Dresden China; Powder-puff; A Huntsman, and so forth. Up till this last war, anyhow, the equivalent lust to be A Huntsman or A Persian Maid was still catered for at small photographers along the Front or on the pier, at seaside resorts. ("Marleen in Cabarray" was one of the disguises offered: masher's clothes and top hat.) Psycho-analysts might diagnose it as a symptom of the escape complex.

Then the fashion turned to "artistic" photographs with vegetation added: the toying-with-a-rose kind, chiffon draped about the shoulders in a cloud; girl with long hair, pensive in a frame of apple-blossom. I came in for those, in my rebel adolescence; Mother liked me to be photographed with my hair down. She died when she was eighty, and she kept *all* my photos stuck fanwise into a special brocade screen with folds and pockets for that purpose; they had, by then, reached a formidable assembly: thrills of pleasure to her, Madame Tussaud's to me. For her sake alone I kept some stills that they took when I was in Hollywood; Mother adored these stills: so modern and dashing not to



call them just photographs. She was sweet about them: "I like to see it when you are smiling and not always so sad, for then I know you are having a good time," she wrote. Well . . . if I have to be handed down on a photograph, I prefer posterity to remember me sad; but those where I was not smiling, and therefore just bearable, Mother stuck in the frame so as to conceal them cunningly behind the others. She used to cut ghastly flashlight photographs from the illustrated papers; quite unprepared, one came into the room, caught sight of them with a cry of horror—"Darling, *must* you keep that?"—only to be told that some unreliable Mrs. So-and-so had seen it and liked it, had said perhaps I looked so young in it, so attractive. . . .

Mother adored it when I was "flashlit" with a Celebrity; it was her favourite thing; though she was speechless with indignation if, as nearly always happened, they came out better-looking than I. Unless it was a man, and then mysteriously she did not mind: it was "different."

All this can be psychologically linked up with her extraordinary distress when I refused to dye my hair. For, like herself, I went white very early. "People will think" she began. . . . But I remained implacable; she sighed, and for the moment gave it up; then, returning later to the attack: "I do not mean, of course, that you should dye it—" "Then, Mummy darling, what *do* you mean?" On an oblique shaft she replied: "There is no need, isn't it, that they should think you are unhappy and as old as having white hair, when you are not?" Those photographs where my hair came out a satisfactory crisp silver would as far as possible be hidden deep in the folds of the screen, or at least (she simply could not destroy any) had to yield front place to special atrocities of me in a hat. Smiling and hatted, with plenty of dark hair—that was Mother's notion of Gladys at her Best; with, let us say, Marlene Dietrich demure in the background.

A daughter who wrote produced not too lean a harvest from the photographers; specimens exacted by publishers and editors and film producers for "publicity." But if Mother could have had her choice, she would probably have preferred me as a Society

Débutante permanently on the eve of her Coming-out Ball; for true Viennese of her generation, of such was the Kingdom of Heaven.

And still I cannot discover what to do with photographs given to me. Still, lacking a brocade screen, I remain ungrateful.

I might as well confess further that I cannot force myself to be grateful for sopranos, though many people strangely draw pleasure from their warblings, even to naming the toast after them. "Hark! Hark! the lark." . . . Now, at this very moment of writing, a soprano is coming thinly but indomitably over the air, to be cut off by merely touching a switch, if only (vain wish) I could masterfully reach over to other people's switches. If all the sopranos in their coloraturas were laid end to end, billowing from the Eros statue to Arthur's Seat, in a useful Overland Route . . .

On the other hand, and I hope this is no delusion, I fancy I am that rare type who can be grateful for advice, or at any rate for those friends who genuinely absorb themselves in my troubles and produce a constructive remedy: "Here's what you *ought* to do," spoken on a note of compassion tinged with respect for my invariably noble conduct in adversity.

A scarlet ladybird ran almost under our feet across the pavement in Burlington Gardens as we set out on the bright afternoon of V-J day, the whole of London also streaming along towards Buckingham Palace, as though it were a magnet for thanksgiving. I had never before noticed a ladybird about to hurl itself under city traffic, and it was a problem to know what to do with it, for this was not the sort of day on which one would allow it to be run over. ("Put it on a leaf!" "I haven't got a leaf!") So we contrived to carry along Little Red Nuisance as far as the Green Park.

Among the beds of brilliant geraniums outside Buckingham Palace, we squatted on the grass in that mood, rarely achieved, of being not one person or two, but ten thousand: a miracle had touched us all that day, to let us shed our tiresome self with-

out the slightest effort. After six years of war . . . for a few hours we could dwell in peace with no fermenting thoughts of afterwards. In the sunshine nobody cared to be rowdy, as they would be later on at dusk and darkness. And, strangely, nobody had to push and jostle and thrust a way through the crowd; if bodies happened to touch, it was without hurt, like Venetian gondolas springing apart again with air-bubble lightness. Here, in a sort of brief, celestial co-ordination, was triumph without involving a brutal sense of over-topping others. Countless children, guided only by reins or carried on the shoulder, formed part of this rejoicing pageant that flowed along endlessly towards the Palace. Sedate parents, elderly folk, wore lively, foolish little caps in red, white, and blue with provocative mottoes, rakishly tilted above their serene faces—faces that suddenly looked rested from an inexorable strain.

Down the middle of the Mall, led by a car spilling over with joyful sailors, marched an impromptu little procession of Wrens, one of them dancing along alone behind the rest, her fair head thrown back, her feet kicked high in a sort of innocent bacchanalia.

As my thankfulness for V-E day had only shouted its presence long afterwards, while unpacking my shelter-bag on an ordinary day without any letter to mark it scarlet, I did not quite realize what V-J day meant until I began to notice all through September and October, directly the Japanese prisoner-of-war camps in Malaya were burst open, certain significant little messages in the *Times* Personal Column: "Safe in India" . . . "Safe and Well" . . . "Coming home soon" . . . And if you had my imagination, you could almost hear the heart leap when these reassurances were first received. . . . Till you wished that, on the contrary, you had no imagination, when a few quiet requests leaked into that joyful column, asking those who were released to send any possible news of their fellow-prisoners to wife, parents, sister, where no news had come.

### CHAPTER III Kingfisher Flash

One cannot watch a kingfisher; one can hardly every say, even, that one has seen a kingfisher. Blackbirds, thrushes, sparrows and swallows and starlings, even if you are no bird-fancier, can be treated as an entertainment: "Look at that fat thrush strutting on the lawn." "There's a blackbird—I believe he has a nest in the fork of that branch." Blackbirds and thrushes are usually solo performers. Swallows, skimming, swooping, dipping, we watch in numbers, countless because they are never still. Starlings, too, are rarely of individual interest; they stretch out in flight transparent as black lace, or thicken again into a denser black scarf. As for sparrows, it is no good pretending they are an uncommon sight to be announced with a touch of breathlessness and pride that your eyes have strayed to exactly the right place at exactly the right time: "What *do* you think I saw this morning? A *sparrow*! As clearly as anything. He flew straight out of that gap between the willows and across the lawn. There wasn't time to call you. . . ."

There never *is* time to call anyone, when by a strange flash of luck you do actually see a kingfisher. No, you never really see it, only memory tells you that you have, a few seconds after the vivid streak of blue has vanished. And then you tell the others, and they are cross; but you go about for the rest of the day with a strange feeling as though you had been privileged, as though a dream had come true.

Apparently a kingfisher haunts the stream which runs through my garden. According to my friends and household, he lingers; he sits on one of the posts sprouting into young trees (or young trees subdued to the function of posts) fencing the meadow

just across the stream opposite the little terrace. And they accuse me of envy, a deadly sin, when I affect utter disbelief, and petulantly refuse to have all this invisible Blue-Bird nonsense brought onto my own territory. True, I have seen kingfishers in flight, but always on the broad river, away from home.

If reward and penalty were exactly meted out in this world, we might even go as far as to imagine that to see a kingfisher is a reward for something good that we have done, or a herald of happiness not far away; but the vision is too wayward and too lovely to be fitted in with any relevant pattern of events; no herald of happiness, but happiness itself, as fugitive and (in our finite conception of how favours work out) as indiscriminate.

The kingfisher can boast of no static beauty. It can be hauled down into realistic terms, just a bird with an over-large head and dirty habits, as a line of the rarest poetry can be disintegrated into a collection of heavy syllables scribbled on a flimsy bit of paper. I once wrote a book about a little girl who had been unkindly named Halcyon by a too faithful mother; and a friend gave me for a mascot a china kingfisher, one of the clumsiest ornaments which has ever come my way; even its colour hardly seemed to matter, compared with its total lack of proportion.

No, the glory of a kingfisher is somehow linked up with our "immortal longings." We cannot lay hold of it. Shakespeare or Beethoven can sometimes capture a kingfisher flash; and even then, though we are grateful, the longing remains to possess it ourselves, not at second-hand; to be assured where it can at any moment be found; to watch it for as long as we please. "A kingfisher flash" might be a phrase to express our desperate desire, since banishment began, for Valhalla, Eden, Avalon, Paradise, Nirvana, the Fortunate Isles, the Region Elenore. . . . "That's a little bit of all right," says the Cockney; hardly aware that he is expressing thanks for a little bit, not the whole of the far-off heaven of All Right . . . blue and iridescent and wildly ex-

citing. "What *do* you think? This morning I caught a glimpse of a kingfisher," expresses the same thing.

I know so little of musicians, how they work, how inspiration comes to them or holds aloof, that I had better leave the matter alone. But I have talked with other writers about the queer maddening processes of our trade, and how an idea may streak across the mind in kingfisher flight, and we spend the next year or two wondering if we ever saw it or not, labouring along to the place where we thought it had originally shown itself, in a futile hope that it may appear again. Nevertheless, a whole world of difference exists between a piece of work preceded by the truant vision, and the work which we undertake without it, for expedience' sake, from habit, from obedience.

At this point of agreement, John and I began to wonder about Shakespeare: did *he* anticipate his plays by the kingfisher flash, that sudden check at the mind, that sureness of "*This is it!*" . . . before it all begins to drain down to clay? Did he need inspiration beforehand, he who hardly ever lost it afterwards? Probably he was quite matter of fact in the choice of his subject, picking up a plot carelessly to please the Queen, to please Henslowe and his public: "This'll do, I think. And I may as well set it in Italy!" . . . And then it poured out in a full-throated glorious stream, except now and then, when (in our own idiom) he got all bogged up, and couldn't care less. Compare even Shakespeare's innumerable kingfisher flashes with those terrible lapses when he merely wrote it down.

"Unarm, Eros; The long day's task is done,  
And we must sleep."

That is in one style, and in the other:

"Well, while I live I'll fear no other thing  
So sore as keeping safe Nerissa's ring."

If I attempt to make a picture-book of imagination at work (and of course I cannot), I visualise a group of sky-scrappers, all

their multitudinous windows with blinds perpetually whizzing up and snapping down, so that I can nexer fix on any tiny brilliant square and call it, say, a lighted window on the thirty-seventh floor.

He thought he saw a Rattlesnake  
That questioned him in Greek:  
He looked again, and found it was  
The Middle of Next Week;  
"The one thing I regret," he said,  
"Is that it cannot speak!"

Only one man could almost express the inexpressible; that king of alternate mathematics and inconsequences, Lewis Carroll.

Wordsworth never mentioned kingfishers. Apart from that, he too, but in a different way from the Reverend Dodgson, has captured the whole matter and packed it closely into his *Intimations of Immortality*. What a pity that poem cannot be republished for every generation as though freshly written, and anonymously; for though it would be a shame to deprive Wordsworth of his credit marks, it must be admitted that his name has gathered a sort of encrustation of dullness and crossness, unfairly associated with an old sheep mildly bleating, while in the foreground village children argue like morons. Yet say his name slowly, divide it into two, and then hear it not as a pun, but as a statement. For when he was not being a mere school essay subject for this week ("Write on Wordsworth and the Lake Poets and Their Influence on Contemporary English Literature"), who knew better than he what words could be worth?

The Bridge-of-San-Luis-Rey formula for putting together a novel lasted a good many years, and is not yet quite out of fashion, though in England between 1940 and 1944 it had a strong competitor in the village-in-wartime formula, containing the arrival and behaviour of évacuées from the towns, and the Home Guard, and the start of rationing, and the early air-raids. And then about 1944, several novels appeared celebrating the

intense joy and significance of the million small miracles in everyday life; kingfisher flashes seen with new and brilliant appreciation, perhaps because we were being remorselessly stripped of so much else on a seemingly bigger scale. *A Well Full of Leaves*, *The Little Locksmith*, *A Tree Grows in Brooklyn*, and others whose titles I have forgotten are all on what I called an aware-that-life-is-living formula. Paying tribute to Francis Thompson, I might have found a less flippant summing-up; for they also try to capture and set down, by thankfulness re-born, the world intangible, the world unknowable; the world which at vagrant seconds, always unforeseen, we are allowed to touch and know:

The angels keep their ancient places;—  
 Turn but a stone, and start a wing!  
 'Tis ye, 'tis your estranged faces,  
 That miss the many-splendoured thing.

He called the poem "In No Strange Land," a significant title carrying a jubilant suggestion that one need never be homesick; nevertheless one is haunted, after reading it, by a sense that the poet was desperately homesick all the time for those regions of "the many-splendoured thing" which he knew better than nearly all men who are not mystics and poets; knew they were so incredibly close to all of us, that we had but to turn a stone and we should start a wing . . . a kingfisher wing, a flash of incredible blue. And though I have often quoted this poem, it was only the other day that I noticed its title: "In No Strange Land," which divorces it from Wordsworth and his sad acceptance of the light of common day, to link it all the more closely with an idea by G. K. Chesterton:

The whole land was lit up, as it were, back to the first fields of my childhood. All those blind fancies of boyhood which . . . I have tried in vain to trace on the darkness, became suddenly transparent and sane. I was right when I felt that roses were red by some sort of choice: it was the divine choice. I was right when I felt that I would almost rather say that grass was the wrong colour than say that it



must by necessity have been that colour: it might verily have been any other. My sense that happiness hung on the crazy thread of a condition did mean something when all was said: It meant the whole doctrine of the Fall. Even those dim and shapeless monsters of notions which I have not been able to describe, much less defend, stepped quietly into their places like colossal caryatides of the creed. The fancy that the cosmos was not vast and void, but small and cosy, had a fulfilled significance now, for anything that is a work of art must be small in the sight of the artist; to God the stars might be only small and dear, like diamonds. And my haunting instinct that somehow good was not merely a tool to be used, but a relic to be guarded, like the goods from Crusoe's ship—even that had been the wild whisper of something originally wise, for, according to Christianity, we were indeed the survivors of a wreck, the crew of a golden ship that had gone down before the beginning of the world.

But the important matter was this, that it entirely reversed the reason for optimism. And the instant the reversal was made it felt like the abrupt ease when a bone is put back in the socket.

I have only to add to this the whole of Wordsworth's *Intimations of Immortality* . . . and then lie back relieved and indolently certain that by no labour of my own I have explained myself perfectly.

Is it too unpardonably easy, this temptation to quote, when instead one should try to find out first what one is trying to say, and then go in quest of a kingfisher flash of words to set it down clear and simple and alive? For I want to assemble small, half-forgotten miracles into a glowing affirmation of splendour still enduring; and then add to the collection that halcyon moment, less than a week ago, when I myself actually saw the bird in flight for long enough to record that it was not only a jewelled dazzle of blue, but that the blue was lighter and greener than I had always expected it to be. . . . But after I have made my collection, after all my busyness, trotting to and fro, and gathering them into little heaps, remembering one and mislaying a thousand more, then I *know* I shall break down again, and supplement inadequacy by quoting Gerard Hopkins in praise of Pied Beauty. So I might as well do it now, and deserve my scolding:

Glory be to God for dappled things—  
 For skies as couple-coloured as a brindled cow;  
 For rose-moles all in stipple upon trout that swim;  
 Fresh fire-coal, chestnut-falls, finches' wings;  
 Landscapes plotted and pieced—fold, fallow and plow;  
 And all trades, their gear and tackle and trim.  
 All things counter, original, spare, strange;  
 Whatever is fickle, freckled (who knows how?)  
 With swift, slow; sweet, sour; adazzle, dim;  
 He fathers-forth whose beauty is past change:  
 Praise Him.

As long as I can remember, the litter of small miracles strewn over time and place have salted my take-it-for-granted indifference by a conviction that they had some personal direction, were, in fact, secretly addressed to me. Many of my friends have had the same idea over *their* miniature miracles. These miracles of ours are by dictionary definition not miracles at all, as pompously signifying a check or reversal in the processes of nature for our private benefit, but only our own minds suddenly illuminated and concentrated, say on a tiny perfect bird-feather picked up on the grass, which might have been dropped there morning after morning for fifty years, seen without being specially honoured; but for those few seconds of our notice: "Why, it's a miracle!"

I'm more likely to feel that a miracle is happening, not in full summer, but during one of those windless melon seasons of late October, when with no visible compulsion or impetus, showers of yellow leaves parachute slowly all day long from the branches, and with the movement of snowflakes, alight without a jar, and gather on the grass; or when furled leaves, silver on one side, dark brown on the other, but on both sides gilded by the sun, drift down the current of the stream, rather than if great autumn gales were tossing and struggling among the boughs, making a mighty to-do as they snap them off and send them swirling along the water and under the bank where clumps of white Michaelmas daisies grow tall and wild, because I should quaintly argue:

"Oh, yes, but *that's* the wind," without ever going that one short step beyond flat statement into mystery by asking myself: *What's* the wind?

I have often, for convenience, had notes sent to me in a registered packet from the bank; yet only once did it strike me as a miracle that signing my name on an oblong piece of paper and sending it off to a large building in Piccadilly, should bring forth this instant shower of gold's equivalent.

Spindleberries I choose to believe (certainly with no justification) are "addressed" to me whenever at any moment I see them in a great bush of coral drops, topping a hedge against the sky; sudden chuckles or scatters of bird-song; white violets always—for being white; and the sudden smell of violets of all shades, pale blue and deep purple, when I open the sitting-room door of my cottage into the garden in November and December. And the sudden bouquet and taste of Rhône wine when for the saddest of all reasons one has almost forgotten how it tasted, and then after six years of war, just one bottle of the authentic gun-flint vintage brings it back with a rush.

I doubt if I can check myself from repeating "a sudden" each time I collect a small miracle to add to my heap; "sudden" must be what we inelegantly term nowadays the "operative word." Perhaps I could say once and for all "suddenly seen," "suddenly smelt," "suddenly tasted," "suddenly noticed," to cover them all.

A lawn of velvety grass so closely shaven that birds strutting about on it look quite startlingly clear and dark, especially towards evening. A round tree covered with huge red apples glowing in the sun. And our golden plum-tree, not round but like a heavy waterfall of fruit. And the miracle of the rare right word when poets have found it . . . and a few times when actors have spoken it. And four chestnut trees in the country road outside my cottage door, very special chestnut trees that do not only turn yellow, but one a pure light coral and the other ruby. And a friend who has been blinded in the war coming into the room cured when one had not known he was cured, standing still

and exclaiming: "So *this* is what it looks like!" And rainbows each time you suddenly see them—you never see a rainbow slowly—but especially if you are facing the way of the rain-dark sky, your back to the evening sun just broken through its bars, and all the twigs and leaves and the hedges and trees sharply glittering and flashing in front of that indigo black. And another stormy sky, darker than lead, with the sea silver-white and luminous . . . a brief storm and a rainbow, and each single gull cut sharply in bright white. A million gulls rising suddenly together from the beach, a moving curtain against air and sky and sea broken into an amazement of wings—till gradually they settle, and the miracle is suspended till the impulse seizes them again. The strong, tireless beat of wild swans on the wing up the ley at Tor Cross. The glamour of a pause in the late afternoon after a stormy day, when the wind has dropped, and the sky is light blue and clear, and stripes of sunlight fall across the greenest field over the gate on the other side of the lane where we always find violets; a few pheasants running happily out of the wood; beyond that the stream like glass in motion, a blackbird solo, an arrogant young cock crowing at the farm; and the strange enchantment of the farmhouse itself, pale green lichen, clusters of roofs shining timidly in the sun's slant, at the top of the ley, ducks rustling in the stripy golden reeds, and a round tree on the slope opposite, liquid with starling chatter. The sea hissing and crunching half a mile distant. A confident little grey cat with milk-white legs trotting up to us, asking to be lifted and liked, shaking a wet paw fastidiously at each step. There are three small ducks afloat, trailing arrows on the iridescent smooth surface of the ley—and then suddenly there are none, only three spreading circles.

And shells. In my modest claim that all these miracles are addressed direct to me, I am most certain of it where shells are concerned. In fact, over rainbows I cannot be certain of my claim at all . . . for was there not some promise in the Old Testament that they were sent as a covenant to *all* mankind? But shells—

why do they not cause the same excitement in everyone as in myself? I have seen dozens of people sitting on the sand, looking at the sea, throwing pebbles in it, digging holes in the sand, reading, knitting, eating oranges, talking of bathing, keeping an eye on the dog, keeping an eye on the child, watching the passing ships, the passing clouds, the passing crabs—while all the time on the firm stretch of brown, darker than gold, where the waves were just bringing up treasure, slowly walking along, head bent, one's eye would suddenly be caught by the shape of a shell . . . and another . . . and another . . . absolute perfection in tint and design, conceived without flaw in judgment and workmanship. How can you leave them lying there on the beach to be trodden on, broken, lifted and swept back again by the tide? It is not possible for me to walk along the wet beach without picking up shells, filling my pockets, filling my hands, filling any bag or pail that I have had the foresight to bring along; drunk on shells, ignoring time or weather or distance, lured on and on, and, thank God, marvelling all the time. There is no blunted edge, no satiety in the repeated miracle; only spoilt by that rueful moment, after bringing them home and displaying them to oneself all over again, when one has to say "What *shall* I do with them?" Sometimes if you are not alone a bright voice replies with the suggestion that you should stick them in patterns on cardboard boxes. *Of course* you never stick them in patterns on cardboard boxes; nor can you throw them away. You cannot *do* anything with the aftermath of picking up shells—except stare at them, fascinated, almost hypnotised, not only by their multiplicity and variety in beauty, but even more by their beauty exactly repeated. To think that it could be done again, and over and over and over again; no accident, no transient glory, but each shell an achievement deliberately wrought; counted or countless, who can say?

Yes, of course, all this nonsense can apply to leaves and flowers and birds and fishes as well. I once knew a man who was MOM; that is to say, afflicted by the creed of mind-over-matter,

and with the not unusual desire for Utopia on earth. The latter he tried to describe in vague terms of pottery and sharing-without-personal-credit: "I mean—well, for instance—if pottery's your thing, you start making a pot—and then you go on somewhere else, to another country it may be, and go on with a pot someone else has begun—while someone else goes on with *your* pot. . . ."

If pottery's your thing.

Shells are my thing. Shells and their natural element. I have just had a look at the shells I picked up on the Velvet Strand of Portmarnock one summer, Irish shells; dryness cannot alter the miraculous ideas expressed in curves and points and swirls of shape, but their glistening colours had faded, and without them they might almost have been made by man. Three things I could have done: taken them out of the box and tipped them for brief refreshment in a wash-basin full of water; carried them back to live in the sea where I was going next week (and that would not be a bad notion if I did it in a matter-of-fact way without winsome apostrophe); or leave them where they were as an occasional reminder not to put miracles in a box, nor kingfishers in a cage (nor even, perhaps, rainbows in a picture). An uncle of mine had a jewelled snuff-box with a little singing bird that came up and trilled for a few moments when I pressed the spring. . . .

There could be no question of scooping up to carry home the miracle of a little singing rill of water that ran hidden and inviolate through a bank beside a moorland road not far from Hartland in North Devon. For we could not trace where the flow of it began or ended; it never came into sight like the many other brooks and freshlets that watered those moors. For two days it sounded clear and loud, but on the third day it had gone, and we never heard it again. "Never heard again" . . . "never seen again" are haunting phrases which nearly everyone uses occasionally, with an inflexion half puzzled, half resentful. Like that one fugitive spindleberry bush, or a certain limpid rock pool in Cornwall, greener than all other pools, a perfect circle. Or some-

times you have a glimpse of a house as you drive swiftly past, and then return to look for it later. The bush, the pool, the house, the singing rill inside the bank, they simply depart if they do not wish to remain, and leave you explaining with a great deal of emphasis to your companion: "I tell you it's *exactly* the same place! It *can't* have gone!" Rain or lack of rain had nothing to do with what Sherlock Holmes would have called *The Mystery of the Disappearing Rill*; the weather had not altered; it was just part of a holiday when small queer things kept on happening.

My host and hostess at the inn invited me to assist while they unpacked an ancient oak chest with a sloping lid and carved front, which had come along unexplained and unexpected in a "lot" of three chairs, bought on their behalf a fortnight before. The sale had been in a town some distance away, at a mansion where two old maiden ladies had lived for a great many years. Make up the vanished household, if you can, from the curious treasure-trove we hauled up out of the chest: A stiff magenta robe, Indian or Chinese, with a filthy sort of brown wool girdle (instantly burnt); a white veil; a coat-hanger; some canvas for embroidery—old lady stuff; but then a complete Anne Boleyn fancy-dress with boned bodice and head-dress; a Chinese fan with painted figures; a wooden box containing an assortment of paint-brushes, large and small, sable and camel-hair, and a lot of tubes of dirty half-used-up paints, including an unused Antwerp blue; and a collection of pencils, old and hard and dry; two books, one on the costume of the period of Henry VIII with a picture of Anne Boleyn from which the fancy-dress was faithfully carried out; the other a dumpy little leather prayer-book of Queen Victoria's Diamond Jubilee, inscribed "To my dear wife" and stuck all over with quotations and hymns and bits of poetry, and—

I had been expecting all day one of those peculiar small signs that something in this place and at this time was directed towards me and no-one else. The day had started like lead; I had had a reason for dreading it which I cannot now remember;

and the gales and rain were almost unbelievable, even in this September of unbelievably bad weather; and when I rang up the only person I knew in the neighbourhood, I heard he had gone to Barnstaple Fair. "Here's me," I reflected (this sort of moping always begins with "Here's me"), "here's me, feeling horrid, and there's other people—*they* go to Barnstaple Fair," ignoring that our climate was doing its best to mar even such occasions of jollity and colour and merry-go-round, gifts and dancing and maypoles and carefree young couples in their brightest clothes. "*Everyone* else goes to Barnstaple Fair, while here's me." . . . And here too was my answer, my secret sign, as always marvellously hidden, and needing a little sequence of pot-hooks and hangers to discover it cut out and stuck into that dumpy Jubilee Book surrounded with stamps of Queen Victoria's head at all ages, among the motley collection found in the chest sent along to the inn by mistake.

The longest and most abstruse flight of a philosopher becomes clear and shallow, in the flash of a moment, when we suddenly perceive the aspect and drift of his intention. The longest argument is but a finger pointed; once we get our own finger rightly parallel, and we see what the man meant, whether it be a new star or an old street-lamp. And briefly, if it is a saying hard to understand, it is because we are thinking of something else.

Yet I was still not at the core of this holiday, chosen at random and because I knew of a good inn standing as inns should, white and welcoming and alone, beside a moorland road a few miles from Hartland. By chance again, on a drive to Hartland Point and the Lighthouse, a lad who drove our taxi stopped at a tall church at Stoke on the way home, and suggested in rich Devon brogue that we might care to go in. It was the church of St. Nectan who appears in the Calendar of the Book of Hours at Launceston Priory as "*Sancti Nectani, martyris, mor' oct.*" on 17 June; and his name appears also in the Litany. William of Worcester also found the name of St. Nectan, martyr, in the Kalendar of Bodmin Priory.



I was born on June 17th, so St. Nectan immediately sprang into a saint of personal interest, though I only discovered this later on the same evening; for I had fallen in love with the church and bought up all the accessible literature on sale there. Almost at once, I learnt of another coincidence bringing him even closer than the accidental date of his martyrdom: his mother was called Gladwesa—*my* name—Gladys in the Celtic of that period. Charmed and encouraged beyond all sensible proportion, I went on reading the life of St. Nectan.

His father apparently was a Welsh prince named Brocanus: before he had any children he went to Ireland and remained there for twenty-four years, doing good works. It then occurred to him to return to his native land and look up his wife, who thereafter bore him twenty-four sons and daughters, one for every year he had stayed away.

And wondering at the power of God, which none can resist, he said: "Now hath God punished in me what I vainly intended contrary to the disposition of His will. For God has given to me, who unlawfully fled from the society of my wife lest I should beget offspring, a child for each year of unlawful continence."

All the twenty-four were afterwards holy martyrs, confessors, and hermits, but Nectan, the eldest, wrought more splendid miracles than all the others. He was inspired after many years of fasting and vigilant prayer to imitate the great hermit Anthony, so he left his kin and his kingdom and embarked in a little boat and committed himself and his voyage to the direction of the Lord.

And so, with but little labour yet with good success, under the guidance of the Lord he arrived happily, having escaped all danger of shipwreck, at a certain wooded solitude situated in the northern part of Devon, which, from the huge number of harts who frequently of old time gathered together there, is called Hertiland.

In a valley not far from the sea, in search of a place convenient for the solitary life, he lit on a fountain of never failing water, and near by built himself a hut of branches and bark and

dwelt there for a considerable time, eating only herbs and acorns and so forth, and living a most holy life. All his brothers and sisters (twenty-three) followed his example and also went to live virtuously as hermits in Devon and Cornwall, and once a year they came together in Nectan's cell and conversed of the glory of the life of Heaven.

After some time a swineherd, wandering through the wood in search of his lord's breeding sow and young, stumbled across the holy man's hut. Nectan showed him where they were, and the swineherd's master after hearing the story, compassionate for the hermit's state of extreme indigence (one can imagine him saying "I don't know *how* the fellow manages"), offered him in a humble spirit of charity two cows, both good milkers. St. Nectan accepted them in the spirit in which they were given. One day the cows were carried off by two robbers, and Nectan, searching the woods, found these same robbers half a league away from his hut. He tried to convert them to the unity of the Catholic faith, and they immediately beheaded him. Then came the really exciting part of the chronicle, resembling that old school exercise in punctuation: "King Charles walked and talked an hour after his head was cut off." For Nectan, taking his head in his own hands, "carried it for about half a mile to the fountain near the hut where he lived and there laid it down, smeared all over with blood, on a certain stone, and the bloody traces of that murder and of the miracle still remain marked on that stone, so that neither the lapse of time nor all the rain that has since fallen have effaced them." Not unnaturally, one of the two robbers who beheaded him, on witnessing this, immediately went out of his mind; the other became at once almost totally blind, but while his sight was failing, on seeing what had happened to his companion, repented and groped his way after the holy man. Pricked in his heart at what had taken place, this robber was converted; with the utmost reverence he buried the body near the fountain, and became herald and witness and preacher of the martyrdom.

In the time of Athelstan, King of the English, the body of St.

Nectan was found by a vision bestowed on a simple and devout priest who was bidden look for it and build a church on the spot.

Near the saint's body was also found a bone seal which contains the figure of the holy martyr, showing, not his whole body, but a bust only, and marked with the testimony of his name. For letters are clearly cut upon it, thus. SIGILLUM NECTANI. The inscribing of these two words upon the seal shows that the martyr's own name had been printed on it in order that there might be no doubt as to his person. There was consequently universal rejoicing. Miracles showed how great was the glory of the martyr, and the letters impressed on the seal proved that it was indeed the Nectan who had formerly lived the heremital life in that place.

The rest of this enchanting story of the life of St. Nectan tells of his numberless miracles. I should like to quote them all, but two must be enough. After all, readers who were born on June 17th are unlikely to be more than one in fifty.

Aylward Butta cut down a most beautiful ash-tree in the grove of St. Nectan, which was called the Magpies' Tree. And straightway a mighty weakness took hold of him, and kept him a long time in bed, sore oppressed. At length, feeling a little better, he went to Clovelly and brought back from thence an ash plant and planted it in the aforesaid grove, and immediately he recovered complete health.

The Chapel of the Blessed Martin of Meddon was from of old time endowed with a certain little meadow, which was reserved for the use of the clerks of St. Nectan. . . . A dispute arose concerning the boundaries of that meadow between some litigious rustics and the clerks. In the course of this dispute, one of the rustics, more violent than the rest, holding a hay scythe in his hand, repeatedly invoked a curse upon himself if the boundary of the meadow were not there, and wishing to show the exact place by fixing the handle of the scythe in the ground, he raised the scythe, and not taking heed that the blade was close to his neck, he cut off his own head. His tomb is pointed out by the inhabitants between Meddon and Wichesdon, by the old road which is halfway between the two towns, on the south side of the said road. Ailward the Goldsmith, a man worthy of credence, used to tell the story and show the place where he was killed.

In June that part of Devon is purple and pink with tall fox-gloves standing in regiments in the woods and along the banks

and hedges of the moorland roads, such quantities of foxgloves that after a little while you stop saying: "Oh, look!" and are merely glad of their cheerful battalions glowing in freckled clumps, or swaying in single file against clear spaces of blue sky and blue sea. Foxgloves of June have been chosen, therefore, as St. Nectan's emblem; and on June 17th, the date of the battle of Bunker Hill, the date that France laid down arms in 1940, the date of the Duchess of Richmond's ball on the eve of Waterloo, the school-children of Hartland come in procession to the church of St. Nectan, carrying sheaves of foxgloves which they lay at the foot of the altar or round his statue. So when I arrived a week later, and went into the church, near the altar were great branches of green leaves, and round its base the clumsy bundles of foxgloves still lying, their stalks wrapt up in newspaper. Each child is given a biscuit with St. Nectan's head stamped on it, and an enjoyable time is had by all.

The legend which has attached itself to that flower was unknown to me until I fell over it, as one does, in a most irrelevant place, a novel of Mrs. Gaskell's called *Ruth*:

"For instance," said he, touching a long bud-laden stem of foxglove, in the hedge-side, at the bottom of which one or two crimson speckled flowers were bursting from their green sheathes, "I dare say, you don't know what makes this foxglove bend and sway so gracefully. You think it is blown by the wind, don't you?" He looked at her with a grave smile, which did not enliven his thoughtful eyes, but gave an inexpressible sweetness to his face.

"I always thought it was the wind. What is it?" asked Ruth, innocently.

"Oh, the Welsh tell you that this flower is sacred to the fairies, and that it has the power of recognising them, and all spiritual beings who pass by, and that it bows in deference to them as they waft along. Its Welsh name is *Maneg Ellyllyn*—the good people's glove; and hence, I imagine, our folk's-glove or fox-glove."

I only knew *Cranford* of Mrs. Gaskell's works, until I read *Ruth*, a refreshing story of Fallen Maidenhood, treated as we all used to like maidens to fall in the good old-fashioned days. Our heroine was an orphan of sixteen, sweet, modest, innocent, and

poor. A handsome, rich young rake seduced her with specious promises when she was a dressmaker's assistant, cruelly cast alone on the world. To her surprise she had a baby, but by then he had jilted her; at least, his worldly mother had removed him from danger. For the rest of the book Ruth repented in a big way; stones were cast at her, good men wanted to marry her, and harsh parsons threw her out of their parishes. Surely reality must have been somewhat on these lines in Victorian England, or the story of Ruth could not have recurred so often in fiction by honest and realistic authors: Dickens and his Little Emily, Mrs. Gaskell's Ruth. And they all loved their Fallen Maidens; Meredith's favourite heroine was Dahlia in *Rhoda Fleming*. Barrie says so, with the authority of a friend, in his incisive passage on Meredith's funeral:

The men saluted, the women gave their flowers to Dahlia to give to him, so that she, being the most unhappy and therefore by him the most beloved, should have his last word, and he took their offerings and passed on.

It is at all times a queer delicate matter to distinguish between superstition and a religious belief in miracles. I am inclined to say that when I dabbled a wrenched ankle rather gingerly and shamefacedly in the dark, deep water of St. Nectan's well, said to cure all ills by its healing property, I was using not faith but superstition . . . precisely because of the adverb "shamefacedly." Healing by miracle must depend on the spirit in which one goes to it. A blind dependence on a lore that has assigned meanings to a miscellany of signs and signals and omens, black cats and new moons through glass and the under-ladder route, as affecting one's daily personal life is wholly superstition. God is more than a sort of Supreme Gypsy King who knows the future and will tell it to those who badger him enough, crossing his palm with a piece of silver promise.

I once knew a superstitious woman at a crisis of her life, who was playing one of those games with herself that most

of us have done, challenging chance as we do when we open the Bible and put a finger blindly at a place on the page, meaning to accept it as an indication of what we are to do: a variation of "If the telephone rings by the time I've counted a hundred," or "If I don't see him coming by the time the traffic lights have turned green three times," or "If within the next three days I happen to meet a Double-Arctic Egg Beaver." . . . My superstitious friend was awaiting a signal of some such flippant nature (only, of course, she did not call it flippant) somehow connected with the next person who should come to the front door. The bell rang. A Stranger stood there; he might have been, in this world of bogus symbolism, a Pedlar, a Minstrel, a Wanderer, a Tramp; and he said in solemn tones: "Good evening, madam. I am Ribbon Development."

Figures of Tremendous Import belong only to where they originated: nativity plays, miracle plays; passion plays; morality plays. And even in these the casting should never be such as to bring in the slightest slur of the inept. . . . I agree with the plump and rosy-cheeked village girl who, according to her mother, was asked to take the rôle of the Archangel Gabriel in the school nativity play, and refused: "My Queenie, ma'am, she says she don't approve of blarsphemy."

I did not realize till recently how impressive and terrifying a performance could be given of the medieval morality play *Everyman* (and it is right that it should be terrifying, or it fails in its final consolation), because when I was eighteen we rehearsed it at a school of acting where we were all about as miscast as "my Queenie" would have been as the Archangel Gabriel. God and Death and Knowledge are not characters to be convincingly filled by one's fellow-students. But I saw it performed three years ago in a church, its proper setting, and was stirred and troubled as though I had never read it before, nor myself stumbled about in a long robe, as an inadequate Good Deeds. The morality and miracle plays of the Middle Ages were the be-

getters of our drama of today, our comedy, tragedy, and farce, realism and fairy-tale (not to mention the Punch and Judy show, also a sort of knock-about morality play), nevertheless, it is still embarrassing to *see* what I suppose we should call our "deeper selves," but which are really our inhibited natures, confronted with eternal truths in a theatre at a moment of recreation when, so to speak, we are off our guard. By this, I do not mean to condemn such attacks—rather the contrary. Only I could not help a slight envy of the dear vague old lady, who at the end of Act II of *The Wind of Heaven*, when the cock crew thrice and the curtain fell, was heard to say to her companion:

"Did I hear an owl hoot?"

"Yes, my dear, I think it was."

"Oh, then I was right. . . . How *very* odd!"

*Everyman* was played to a full house; an unembarrassed audience not only because the church was dark, but because we are used to words like "sin" and "repentance" in that setting, whereas until recently the habit of a life-time mentally labelled the theatre as a place to be entertained, to laugh and forget adversity, to be lifted right out of oneself. Yet during the war years, when despondency and desolation often deepened to despair, it became somehow more of a relief to be put back *into* oneself at the theatre, than lifted out. I mean that somewhere inside ourselves was reality; and if we could be aided to establish contact, it proved a more perfect refuge from the nightmare of unreality which was the world all about us, than to be forced back to a cracked hilarity at the capers and predicaments of an even more unreal world, the world which had ceased to exist in 1939. Thoreau said that most men lead lives of quiet desperation, and someone added: "Yes, and since his time our lives have become less quiet and more desperate."

Looking up a few detached notes I had scribbled on the subject some time ago, I discovered that quite without intent to be funny or to wallow in alliteration, I had written "Do doubt, discontent, desolation and despair"—in that order; and for some time I looked

at these hopeful ideas without, oddly enough, finding in them either solace or inspiration. Until I remembered what I had meant to say on Doubt. For it was reassuring, not destructive. I had been reading somebody's book—I cannot say who was the pessimist, for the sole clue in my notes was the capital letter "B" and several dashes—but he had left me with that appalling question which has been argued so many times in metaphysics, as to whether anything in the whole world existed in reality, and not merely as an emanation from my mind? I had heard others in combat with the insidious suggestion, but this was the first time that the monstrous besiegers had, so to speak, entered into the very citadel of my mind. How could I *prove* that anybody round me, thinking, talking, living their lives, was not just myself tirelessly imagining the whole multitudinous world of human company? I was not by any means the first to have an hour of the Red King's Dream.

In a novel by E. M. Forster which I read far too young to understand, some Cambridge undergraduates were discussing whether the cow they saw in the field could possibly be in the field once they stopped seeing it there. The undergraduates appeared to enjoy the discussion; but I, many years later, was not enjoying the terrible sense of loneliness which B. had planted within me. And then, stealing in from outside, as an orchestra does when as yet you can hardly hear the music but only feel it gather, came the comforting idea that I might indeed have spun everything for myself from inside outwards, *except the quality and shock of surprise*; and that would have to come from outside towards me, for it would be sheer nonsense to suppose that one could feel surprise at anything great or small which one had invented within the boundaries of this one-man universe. And so the whole pattern fell once more into place, with God and Creation back again at its conception.

When we see a stretch of firm yellow sand without as much as the print of a crab claw to break its untrodden perfection, or a lawn spread with a web of glittering dew, or (offering perhaps more temptation than either of these) a field of new-fallen snow,



what is that peculiar fascination which makes us desire to run on the sand, tread in the snow, break the shining pattern of dew with our feet? Can it be a subconscious wish to prove to ourselves that we do indeed exist objectively? Look, that's our spoor breaking the snow, the sand, the dew on the grass. . . . There we started; here we stopped, turned to the left, scuffed up the sand, dirtied the snow, darkened the grass under the dew. Now we have identified ourselves with that particular sheet of beauty—

And marred it for ever.

And now, stupidly, we begin to be discontented with perfection spoilt, although we ourselves have wilfully spoilt it. What made us do it, knowing beforehand how we are discontented with a breathlessly fragile glass vase or transparent china tea-cup once either has a crack in it, even if it can still be used?

The urge some people have to carve initials on tree-trunks, or scribble their names on the walls of church porches, springs, I think, from a slightly different cause than merely to deface beauty; perhaps from a preposterous notion of the importance of their personal attributes which has to be proclaimed willy-nilly: their names, their initials, their girl-friend's heart interlaced with their own. And doing this, they are probably not discontented afterwards at what they have done, even if they were the first to use the monument, the porch, the tree-trunk for that purpose. All the better! They will swagger off quite delighted at having left a few chips of their important selves behind them. But the compulsion to print a Longfellow on the Sands of Time is different, and our after-discontent, which experience can foretell but not prevent, remains an interesting perplexity. For it is true that discontent can be interesting as a cloud darkening the sun, though the next stage of our pilgrimage in these regions may well be desolation: a bog, not a cloud; clouds travel, but bogs stay where they are and see whom they can get.

What can we find, each of us, as a barrier to come between ourselves and despair without cutting us off from life itself? Letting it be implicit of course, that life means neither "my life" nor

"your life," nor "his life." Life means the whole thing, for nowadays (or is it an illusion of despair that nowadays is so far worse than other days?) we are reduced to a bare minimum; there are no spare parts to be had just for the asking, and most panaceas must merely raise an ironic laugh if recommended. Little good, the usual wise suggestions of a double whisky, or take your car and drive right out into the country to the Downs and as far as the sea; or, again, relax, don't worry, get away from it all and take a complete holiday abroad, or have your house decorated from hall to attic, or buy a new outfit, although the season is nearly over and you'll hardly wear it, or—

Or stop talking foolishness.

"Well then, we must find you an interest." But an "interest" urged on us in that remedial tone is likely to be merely a hobby; and hobbies are the powder-closets and anterooms of life. No; if we are to combat desolation and despair, we are thrown back at first on rubbing two pieces of stone together to start a fire: if we can only get a spark—good! Soon we shall have a blaze; but we must do something *quick*, feed it with fuel before it flickers and subsides again. Then who can ask for an interest in life more vivid, more illuminating, than life itself? a renewal of faith; the hope that by a miracle we shall catch a kingfisher flash of the original design.

Were we not ashamed to admit our lapses into desolation, we might do more about fighting this strange nostalgic ailment of the spirit. "It is fear, little brother, it is fear." Fear that flits in the dark with unearthly moans and squeaks, like a bat that should never have got into the room at all. One has only to notice what is everybody's worst fear, to be amazed for the hundredth time that they are afraid of what we are not, and we are afraid of what has never occurred to them as being at all frightening, and that each of them is most afraid of something different from the rest. Fear is not a static thing, a solid cube that can be put down in one place and we know that that is the place where fear is found. It is a horrible, infectious, spreading fluid, as well as a bat that

flaps in the darkness. I could find five hundred other metaphors for fear before I even started to look for one remedy slightly more available at our worst times than "We must find you an interest in life."

"We must find you an interest in life" is the equivalent of the obvious slick prescription that we should "forget ourselves and think of others." You can sit from last night until tomorrow morning, hard at work forgetting yourself, and still be no nearer. As for relying entirely on an interest in other people—nice work if you can get it, but dangerous; either you put all your eggs in their basket and they are liable to walk off with them; or, acting vice versa, they put all their eggs in *your* basket, and you repeat to yourself, "I mustn't break them," till, exasperated, you feel that breaking them would be the only desirable vent for your feelings.

As a temporary technique to rescue myself from desolation, I have occasionally succeeded by applying shock methods; goaded myself into shame and thankfulness by laying beside it the blacker life-story of someone else. But you can use that muscle too often, until it fails to react. "Technique" is defined in the dictionary as "mechanical skill," and no man can live by mechanical skill alone.

The well-wisher whom I have imagined trying to organize our lives so that we can be happy, wealthy, and wise, disgusted at last by our resistance to every suggestion, will heartily recommend religion. Which is like prescribing a square meal to a starving man without showing him the means of getting it. He may add that he means "a sensible religion," not miracles and all that nonsense.

But my belief that miracles have happened in human history is not a mystical belief at all; I believe in them upon human evidences as I do in the discovery of America. . . . Somehow or other an extraordinary idea has arisen that the disbelievers in miracles consider them coldly and fairly, while believers in miracles accept them only in connection with some dogma. The fact is quite the other way. The believers in miracles accept them (rightly or wrongly) because they have evidence for them. The disbelievers in miracles deny

them (rightly or wrongly) because they have a doctrine against them. The open, obvious, democratic thing is to believe an old apple-woman when she bears testimony to a miracle, just as you believe an old apple-woman when she bears testimony to a murder.

The odd thing about Chesterton is how he can make you feel a bit of an idiot for not having noticed you had always thought a thing, but did not know you had thought it until he put it that way. A little later, on the same page, he remarked: "Medieval documents attest certain miracles as much as they attest certain battles." And it is quite true that I believed in the discovery of America on evidence, and did not go there myself merely to make sure, but for gayer reasons. And I believe in battles, too, on written evidence, either on something enormous contained in the flat word "history"—Agincourt, Crécy, Bunker Hill, and so on—or on something even more fantastic called "contemporary reporting."

So that, yes, I do believe in miracles and all that nonsense, though not in miracles that *are* nonsense.

His Omnipotence means power to do all that is intrinsically possible, not to do the intrinsically impossible. You may attribute miracles to Him, but not nonsense. . . . If you choose to say "God can give a creature free-will and at the same time withhold free-will from it," you have not succeeded in saying *anything* about God: meaningless combinations of words do not suddenly acquire meaning simply because we prefix to them the two other words "God can." It remains true that all *things* are possible with God: the intrinsic impossibilities are not things but nonentities. It is no more possible for God than for the weakest of His creatures to carry out both of two mutually exclusive alternatives; not because His power meets an obstacle, but because nonsense remains nonsense even when we talk it about God.

The author of this quotation, C. S. Lewis, must be essentially a grateful man. For I came to appreciate his writing, not through the popular *Screwtape Letters*, but from a review of his anthology of George Macdonald, to which he had written a preface.

In making this collection I was discharging a debt of justice. I have never concealed the fact that I regarded him as my master; in-

deed I fancy I have never written a book in which I did not quote from him. But it has not seemed to me that those who have received my books kindly take even now sufficient notice of the affiliation. Honestly drives me to emphasise it.

Naturally the preface took me on to George Macdonald himself; and I in my turn, and trying not to sound too much like an after-dinner speech (for indeed I am sincere), must thank Mr. Desmond MacCarthy for his review which brought me to Mr. C. S. Lewis, and thence to that beautiful old man George Macdonald. It is ridiculous to call him an old man, for he died in 1905, and so in truth he was as young as he was old; but I happened to see his photograph as a frontispiece to a biography by his son, and it was the head of a veteran, with a noble resemblance to George Meredith. So that is how I visualize him in front of me now, while he too tells us very simply what he feels about miracles on earth:

In all His miracles Jesus did only in miniature what His Father does ever in the great. Poor, indeed, was the making of the wine in the . . . pots of stone, compared with its making in the lovely growth of the vine with its clusters of swelling grapes—the live roots gathering from the earth the water that had to be borne in pitchers and poured into the great vases; but it is precious as the interpreter of the same, even in its being the outcome of Our Lord's sympathy with ordinary human rejoicing.

The miracles of Jesus were the ordinary works of His Father wrought small and swift that we might take them in.

Is oxygen-and-hydrogen the divine idea of water? Or has God put the two together only that man might separate and find them out? He allows His child to pull his toys to pieces: but were they made that he might pull them to pieces? He were a child not to be envied for whom his inglorious father would make toys to such an end! A school-examiner might see therein the best use of a toy, but not a father! Find for us what in the constitution of the two gases makes them fit and capable to be thus honoured in forming the lovely thing, and you will give us a revelation about more than water, namely about the God who made oxygen and hydrogen. There is no water in oxygen, no water in hydrogen; it comes bubbling fresh from the imagination of the living God, rushing from under the

great white throne of the glacier. The very thought of it makes one gasp with an elemental joy no metaphysician can analyse. The water itself, that dances and sings, and slakes the wonderful thirst—symbol and picture of that draught for which the woman of Samaria made her prayer to Jesus—this lovely thing itself, whose very wetness is a delight to every inch of the human body in its embrace—this live thing which, if I might, I would have running through my room, yea, babbling along my table—this water is its own self its own truth, and is therein a truth of God. Let him who would know the truth of the Maker, become sorely athirst, and drink of the brook by the way—then lift up his heart—not at that moment to the Maker of oxygen and hydrogen, but to the Inventor and Mediator of thirst and water, that man might foresee a little of what his soul may find in God.

## CHAPTER IV    Water-Music

On the miracle of water, I feel the same as George Macdonald; that is one of the reasons why I bought my cottage at Brambleford. For the stream running through the orchard of the house in which Kenneth Grahame lived when he wrote *The Wind in the Willows*, continues till it flows under a culvert at a junction of road and lane, and straight down between my garden lawn and meadow. So I thought I could sit on the little brick terrace outside the sitting-room, and listen all day long to its musical plash; and all night long hear water chuckle over its gravel bed beneath my bedroom window. On the further side of the culvert the stream broadens into a sunny pool where the village children stand with bare legs, at the eternal fascinating pastime of dropping in leaves and bits of twigs, to see them merrily swirled under the bridge and disappear past the overhanging hawthorne that marks where their territory stops and mine begins. And there the water clacks and burbles as all generous-minded water should, squeezing its way through a narrow channel and down a little slope, only too far for me to hear it from the steps of the terrace by day (terrace is too grand and peacock a word, but I cannot think of its diminutive) or from my bedroom at night. Not to be thwarted, I said to myself: "I'll build a waterfall just under the window."

The stream is lucent and quite deep, with patches of cress and brilliant green weed. (Stevenson threatened a would-be young author with the utmost penalties unless she could make us see a garden without one single use of the word "green.") The meadow on the further side is a royal spread of kingcups in May, meadow-sweet in July, apple and cherry blossom in April, apples in

September and October. I could therefore make no complaint—until I discovered that it flowed swift and level over two feet of mud, not gravel; extremely well-behaved mud, keeping itself to itself unless stirred up by the intermittent population of ducks and water-rats and moor-hens and toads proper to any stream which touches the land of the man who wrote *The Wind in the Willows*; the water remained clear brown and shadowy amber under the cascade of willows on its opposite bank, sparkling and pellucid in the sunshine. . . .

But in all weathers, and at all times of day and night, completely and obstinately *silent*.

I have never known a stream move as silently. However still the air, you could not hear a ripple unless you went right round the cottage, out through the front gate and past the clumps of chestnuts, to where it rushed under the culvert arch, gurgling over a bed of gravel too far away for my hearing.

There are troubles that are real, and troubles that do not exist in the world of reality. I know it did not matter at all that my beautiful stream made music everywhere except where it ran through my garden with the elaborate hush of an advance battalion in enemy territory. I am quite aware that if nothing worse ever happens to me than a silent stream . . . All the same, I tried to think out every method of correcting its discreet behaviour. "Build a dam!" all my friends advised in a jolly sort of way. "Great fun! You get some large stones or boulders—no need to pay anyone to do it, it's the sort of thing you'll enjoy doing yourself!" This was perfectly true; few games I should enjoy better than piling up stones so that the water, baffled, would have to mount my amateur barricade and splash noisily over and down, before travelling on to join the Kennet and the Thames and the North Sea. But can you do all that on an inexorable base of mud? Of course not. I enquired the cost of hiring a professional water-gardener, and was told that naturally it could not be undertaken in wartime or post-wartime ("please, I only *asked*"), but perhaps in two years . . . And it would cost—I believe £2,000 was the



sum mentioned, to reconstruct the whole of my little strip of water-way so that it could not possibly obstruct or upset or overflow into other people's properties for several miles along, nor interfere anywhere with the waters of the mill nor the aerodrome nor the electricity plant. . . .

Two thousand pounds to create a musical babble in a spot where I happened to want it? I decided it would be cheaper to buy one of those shells which echo the distant hollow roar of the sea (I shall never understand why) when you hold it pressed against your ear. So now, when I have duck-yearnings and long to make a splash, I sit on the plank that spans the stream, and dangle my feet, and kick up the surface of the water or stir it with a stick . . . while I muse sorrowfully on its marked lack of resemblance to the well-known Water That Came Down at Lodore. When I learnt to recite that remarkable poem at school, I was told it was onomatopoeic—a word I still find difficulty in spelling, as I know there is a diphthong somewhere but it might happen in three distinct places.

Yet water-words need not necessarily be directly one—(you know what I mean) to suggest the right sound. Some poets can lead you up to it and then let a following quietness leave a space for water to create its own splash and echo. For instance, James Elroy Flecker:

Thy dawn, O Master of the World, thy dawn;  
The hour when lilies open on the lawn;  
The hour when grey wings pass beyond the mountains;  
The hour of silence, when you hear the fountains.

You do hear the fountains, unmistakably you hear them, but not from any plangency in his manipulation of the words, but because "The hour when grey wings pass beyond the mountains" precedes an attentive hush in your mind, and into that encircled hush no other sound is supplied save a fountain-fall in the Persian courtyard beyond where the lovers are sleeping:

The hour when dreams grow brighter and winds colder;  
The hour when young love wakes on a white shoulder

Tennyson's "Brook" will go on chattering for ever, while men may come and men may go. Yet he wrote more haunting water-lines: "Myriads of rivulets hurrying through the lawn." That, however, is onomatopoeic; elsewhere, without any trick-work, he introduces a subtler technique to catch illusion:

The long light shakes  
Across the lakes  
And the wild cataract leaps in glory.

Even more in a line of "Crossing the Bar":

But such a tide as moving seems asleep.

It has a drugged quality: the sea does not break nor crash; it sways on a surfeit of moonlight.

During pleasant interludes between the severe parallel lines of your strenuous working-hours, you can squat on a plank bridge which spans the stream, remembering water-poetry, mostly what you learnt when you were a child; as I, when a child, was caught up by the literary fashion for Stephen Phillips, whom the Colvins, lonely after the death of Stevenson, presented as a new young genius; discovering him where all young poets of the aesthetic period were wont to be—Ernest Dowson and the rest—making verses in the taverns. London was thrilled by Phillips's *Paolo and Francesca* when George Alexander produced it at the St. James's Theatre, with another exciting discovery, a young actor this time, Henry Ainley, in the rôle of Paolo il Bello. There was an arbour scene between the lovers which in my immaturity I thought exquisitely sad and wonderful:

So still it is that you can almost hear  
The sigh of all the sleepers in the world  
And all the rivers running to the sea.

Here again, the same trick-work as Flecker so effectively used: A pause . . . and then, while sound recedes, imagination can seem to join with all the rivers running to the sea. But "The sigh of all the sleepers in the world"—is that where poetry swells from

fantastic imagery into nonsense? I am not arguing for those who will say that poetry is always nonsense, because it often holds more sense than prose, summing up truth in a "kingfisher flash." Swinburne, on the contrary, would sometimes sacrifice nearly all wisdom and coherence for the sake of achieving his onomatopoeic rhythms and effects:

There lived a singer in France of old  
By the tideless dolorous midland sea  
In a land of sand and ruin and gold—

A lovelier Swinburnian line is not by Swinburne at all: "A rose-red city, half as old as time"—and that, surely, does mean simply nothing; yet fulfils itself as poetry, even when we stop to ponder on what John Burgon, the Newdigate prize winner, meant *exactly* by "half as old as time"?

"Come unto these yellow sands," . . . I can never hope to satisfy myself as to how in five words, without any exaggerated similes, Shakespeare could give us all the forlorn shores that have ever ringed an island, as well as all the beaches, familiar yet still enchanted, of the little sea-side places where we were taken in our own childhood. The tide coming in, the tide going out; yellow sands nearly silver, dry as pepper, glittering in the sun where the water never reaches them, but rich and dark and tawny down by the very rim of the sea. . . .

Even till the eastern gate, all fiery-red,  
Opening on Neptune with fair blessed beams,  
Turns into yellow gold his salt green streams.

In *Kubla Khan*, Coleridge matches the feel of his troubled dream with Swinburne's desolate stanzas on a dolorous rhythm:

Where Alph, the sacred river, ran  
Through caverns measureless to man  
Down to a sunless sea.

proving that water—poetry's water—is a sinister companion to man unless it be sunlit. One has the same feeling of menace, of caverns measureless to man, standing under the dome in a big London station at night: Euston or Liverpool Street.

"At Elim are twelve walls and seventy palm-trees." (No, dear, *not* Ealing; Elim. It's a verse in the Old Testament.) Here is a suggestion of refreshment and oasis in the desert of parched heat; buckets being lowered, clanking and splashing, into a well. Richard Le Gallienne pointed to the coolness of this verse, in his book of essays. He appealed irresistibly to our taste when we were in our teens; and at moments he could indeed be a poet unqualified by the adjective "minor."

W. B. Yeats was not a Lake Poet, though he wrote lines that carry the sound of lake-water lapping. Yet in my opinion, he spoilt his famous "Innisfree" with his "nine bean rows"; "nine" is a little too meticulous; you should not begin to count, in poetry. Wordsworth did not tell us how many daffodils he saw beside the lake, beneath the trees. . . .

Rain is also water-music, whether released to lisp and patter lightly on the leaves, or mightier than the swish of any wind. Music of water onto water:

How the lit lake shines, a phosphoric sea,  
And the big rain comes dancing to the earth.

. . . I never hear a deluge released in a thunderstorm without seeing Lac Lemán joyous as Byron meant us to see it.

People that build their houses inland,  
People that buy a plot of ground  
Shaped like a house, and build a house there,  
Far from the sea-board, far from the sound  
Of water sucking the hollow ledges,  
Tons of water striking the shore—  
What do they long for, as I long for  
One salt smell of the sea once more?\*

"People that build their houses inland"—I too am possessed by love of the sea, the sound and the smell and the sight of it, at all moments and in all seasons and weathers. Nothing can equal or come near the sea in my desires, not river nor lake nor torrent nor

\* From "Inland" in *Second April*, published by Harper & Brothers. Copyright 1919, 1947, by Edna St. Vincent Millay.

fountain; not mountain stream nor meadow stream. And yet I have built my house (or rather bought my cottage) inland; I am one of the people of whom Miss Millay speaks, with an endless small discontent that goes on behind all my homely affection for this cottage I have bought inland, near a river, on the edge of the low Downs. Yes, but it was wartime; my London home had been destroyed in 1940 by enemy action. I had to live and work somewhere till 1943, when I returned (in good time for the early 1944 raids and the flying bombs); no one could foretell how long the war might go on; and the sea all round England was "prohibited" area, behind wire entanglements and great concrete blocks.

And then, owning a small patch of England, you get fond of it; you dread the wrench of uprooting; and so you become one of those crazy people who dwell inland; who sit by a little stream watching the brown sleek journey of a water-rat streaking across from bank to bank, whisking into a cave, dark and cool and sedgy.

If all water-words set out to imitate the inimitable, is water-music more successful? Often it is only music with a water-title. Can musicians ever really conjure up cascades of water, so that we are surprised, after the performance, to find ourselves high and dry? Dukas might have worked the spell for me, I think, in his symphonic poem *L'Apprenti-Sorcier*, had not another genius, Walt Disney, superimposed his own visual interpretation on Dukas's rendering of Goethe's ballad; a palimpsest of three. Originally when I heard this music, I pictured the sorcerer with his long, pointed cap, in terms of a German medieval woodcut; the apprentice a round-eyed boy in awe of his master, yet fancying with a leap of joyful arrogance, directly he was left to his own devices, that he too could tamper with magic and set the broom to start the spell . . . and could not stop it; forces too strong for him to understand, poor foolish child, were already flooding and drowning his footling little intention to be so clever and save himself trouble. More and more water flooding the room . . . swirling higher round the walls from an apparently

inexhaustible source . . . more and more and ever more water; cataracts and oceans of water, a Lodore of water, the whole world in liquidation—till a few bars announced the return of the wrathful old wizard from his journey. He reversed the incantation; the water gradually subsided; and we were left to imagine with what remnant of courage the penitent, cowering little apprentice would face a different music.

But when I saw Disney's version, introduced into his *Fantasia*, the apprentice was Mickey Mouse. And, stubbornly, ever since he has remained Mickey Mouse; especially that moment when after it was all over he drew up to the sorcerer, hoping to ingratiate himself, with that small deprecating I-wonder-if-there's-a-faint-hope-that-you-think-it-funny smile. And then the faces of the trudging broomsticks as they came along ankle-deep, knee-deep, waist-deep in water (though they had not ankle, knee nor waist), carrying their interminable buckets, and on their faces that smug expression which said: "No power can deflect me from doing my duty at all costs. You *did* say you wanted water, didn't you?" . . .

Handel's *Water Music* creates so gay an impression of Merrie England, whether at the Elizabethan period or the Restoration, that it is almost incredible it could have originated with the suggestion of a Swedish diplomat to a German composer, when a Hanoverian king was ruling England at one of its heaviest periods. Of course like most people I had always just thought of it as Handel's *Water Music*, until it occurred to me that I might look up *what* water and for what occasion? And learnt that Handel had left the court of George, Elector of Hanover, to come and live in England (for which compliment we thank him); and that George, Elector of Hanover, was very cross about it; and Handel, when he heard that the Elector of Hanover was to become King of England, must have grumbled that you never know how things were going to work out. "Here's me," he might have ejaculated in a mood of deep self-pity, "here's me, out of favour with the court again and with all the dukes and chamberlains and

princelings"—for Germans naturally set great importance on their standing with their Royal or Serene patrons; look at Bach. And then, according to popular legend, Handel's friend Baron Kielmansegg had a bright idea; he would have been startled had he known how often (and how wrongly) posterity was to thank him for advising Handel to put himself right with George I by composing the music to accompany a royal water-party. In actual fact (as Newman Flower pointed out in his masterly biography of Handel, which left no opportunity for unauthentic gate-crashing), George I withdrew his displeasure directly he reached England. He happened to be fond of good music.

Somebody once remarked to me that surely Handel and Beethoven were "very dull." When I heard that, I laughed, as Jaques would say, "sans intermission, an hour by my dial." (Was R. L. S. echoing Jaques or remembering Falstaff when he gave his opinion of the Glasgow memorial to Knox: "I remember when I first saw this, laughing for an hour by Shrewsbury clock"?)

Handel's *Water Music* dull! It opens with a mood of Shakespeare and Old London and light-hearted folk embarking for an outing on barges drawn up at Hampton Court, maybe to go down to Wapping or Cherry Old Stairs or Greenwich . . . till again accuracy quenches these romantic destinations; the picnic was along the stretch between Lambeth and Chelsea. The barges with fifty musicians on board swung along to that haunting, swaying refrain which we shall never quite get out of our heads again; the blunt prows swishing the river to either bank; a regular royal festival, all in the open air; the decks crowded, the banks crowded too; everyone, king and subjects, in high good humour; dancing on the lawn, dancing on the deck; mishaps hailed with jolly laughter; and at the end, the exuberant Suite twice repeated; while Handel, his broad face beaming, lets his portly figure rock a little to the lilt of his own music, foreseeing perhaps, a couple of centuries later, Osbert Sitwell's authoritative assurance of his immortality:

On the coast of Coromandel  
 Dance they to the tunes of Handel;  
 Chorally, that coral coast  
 Correlates the bone to ghost  
 Till word and limb and note seem one,  
 Blending, binding act to tone.

(Mirror-flat and mirror-green  
 Is that lovely water's sheen)  
 Saraband and rigadoun  
 Dance they through the purring noon,  
 While the lacquered waves expand  
 Golden dragons on the sand—

If we collected German water-music and English water-music and French, the Germans (counting Austria) would win on counts; from the delicious tinkle of Schubert's brook ("Ich hört ein Bächlein rauschen") a charming friendly playfellow, lifting and dropping over its stony bed, to the Wagnerian Rhine boiling up till it overflows its banks and falls right out in one tremendous final catastrophe . . . quenching the funeral pyre on which Siegfried and Brünnhilde mingled in a passionate Wagnerian conflagration, swirling away the dwarfs and the Rhine Maidens and the Ring, and the whole incredible operatic Wagnerian hurly-burly of curses and countercurses, buried gold and incest and dragon's blood, contained in the word itself an imprecation and a thunderbolt: *Götterdämmerung*.

As the gaps in my musical education are wider than its cultivated lands, I had never heard of Smetana's six symphonic poems *Má Vlast* (My Country), till Geoffrey hummed a few bars of the second and finest, *Vltava*, and at once I knew I should not rest (musically speaking) till I had heard the whole and collected it safely into my own head, to be found when wanted and often (after the fashion of tunes) persistently and for hours when not wanted at all.

About a week later, the B.B.C. obliged with *Má Vlast* during a fine, frosty winter week when I was at Brambleford, spending my



evenings over a blazing fire of logs the colour of red plums . . . which was odd, because they *were* red plum, the small dead tree condemned and recently cut down for sucking up the good soil round the gooseberry bushes. And plums linked up by association with Hungary, its horsemen and sunflowers and Silvovitz liqueur and old Bohemia. . . . And I wished Smetana had not been stricken with total deafness at the actual time of writing these first two lovely poems of his cycle; and wondering a little how he felt, and how Beethoven felt, at giving to others for always what they could never hear themselves.

The evening's performance synchronised with our local bell-ringers' more than usually enthusiastic Wednesday-night practise. The church is very near my cottage, and though I was confirmed in my original kingfisher-flash of believing that Smetana had been inspired to write his *Vltava* especially for me, I could hear little more. But the B.B.C. earned my gratitude by thoughtfully repeating *Má Vlast* on the next evening, when the bells were silent.

This Moldau leaves an impression of being a reliable river as it rolls through Prague and Bohemia; first a trickle, soon swinging between broad and broader banks, accumulating strength and benevolence; playing no gaudy turbulent tricks—I like a river to *be* a river, and not all cluttered up with Loreleis and Rhine Maidens and bumboats and showboats! Its refrain is not exactly water-music, in the sense of being a river *sound*; more like the river's *song*—a splendid sonorous song that the river would sing had it a voice to translate into human harmony.

Listening entranced, I said: "I'll never lose this!" . . . but it has slipped away already; and when forlornly I try to call it back, I am only humming the "Song of the Volga Boatmen" instead. Which in spite of a certain vague geographical Central European kinship does not (literally) come within a mile of it.

"The Song of the Volga Boatmen," "The Eton Boating Song," "The Skye Boat Song"—state reasons for choice! "The Eton Boating Song" is just plain nostalgia to an old Etonian, a very old

Etonian, an Etonian with the heart of a boy; at the end of the last century it used to be much in sentimental demand as a waltz to wind up the ball, when throaty baritones burst into:

Harrow may be more clever  
 Rugby may make more row  
 But nothing on earth shall sever  
 The bond that is round us now!  
 So we'll pull, pull together—

I have never visited the Volga, so I cannot be sure if that plaintive melody is at all onomatopoeic, expressive of the boatmen tugging at a rope from the towing-path; but realistic or not, it is a good song, difficult to banish after it has lodged in that peculiar region behind your forehead, reserved for inappropriate hauntings when you should be attending to sterner business; though on the principle of one nail drives out another, one can always try the Handel refrain or *Much-Binding-in-the-Marsh*.

Though my perverse memory can never get by heart the words that R. L. S. wrote for the haunting music of the "Skye Boat Song," I far prefer them to the original lines which I suppose were about Bonny Prince Charlie and all that. Certainly I am no Jacobite at heart, and never could care that either the Old or the Young Pretender were "born to be king"; maybe you have to have Scots blood in you to feel fiercely about it. But I do love Skye and the wild beauty of Skye and the sight of the island from the shore of Scotland; and can easily break my heart when I read what the homesick exile wrote in his Samoan island home under Mount Vaea:

Sing me a song of a lad that is gone,  
 Say, could that lad be I?  
 Merry of soul he sailed on a day  
 Over the sea to Skye.

Mull was astern, Rum on the port,  
 Eigg on the starboard bow;  
 Glory of youth glowed in his soul:  
 Where is that glory now?

Associations have a trick of mixing their geography, and I cannot quite eliminate from Skye the picture of a certain irrelevant Cornish cliffpath on the headland going to Cadgwith from the Lizard, where we had to walk in single file; and Noel striding ahead of us, singing with all his might the song of a lad that is gone. . . . He was nineteen then, wistfully mourning for his youth, irreparably lost, on a note of profound conviction that forty-nine will never give.

America's rivers are proud and wide and long, and America's river songs usually voice the plaintive desire of darkies who have been foolish enough somehow to get themselves accidentally separated from these beloved waters, and wish (probably very much to the detriment of their daily job) that they could go back again.

To croon these songs was all very well, during the period they were in fashion. (Sometimes I believed that waiting for the Robert E. Lee must refer to yet another mighty stream.) But then along came the river song to end all river songs, in one magnificent, melancholy melody, the lyric matching the tune and the tune the lyric: Jerome Kern's "Ol' Man River"; and those who had the good fortune to hear Paul Robeson sing it on London's first night of *Show Boat* before it became an unending water-wheel on the brain, felt that sho', chillun dear, dar won't be no need to sing ob rivers nebber no mo.

Yet such songs do not reproduce the sound of the water itself, but the sentiments, not very cheerful, of those watching or listening to water. With Debussy's "Clair de Lune," "Cathédrale Engloutie" and *La Mer*, we exchange human nostalgia for water-music impersonal and heartless.

*La Mer* is not exactly onomatopoeic, though it somehow reproduces what you would expect to hear, sitting idly on the pebbles when the tide is coming in and the waves run up the slope, swell and break, then suck back again; keeping on with this unchanging entertainment, each time with a little more force.

Every now and then the pounding of the sea further out, where it has no concern with the edge of the land, sounds like the roar locked fast in a shell, heard only when you hold it close to your ear.

"The Englutted Cathedral," as I once heard it translated for the benefit of a listener knowing no French, does not quite fulfil the watery promise of its title. "Clair de Lune," on the other hand, also one of Debussy's piano pieces, holds more water than either "En Bateau" or "Reflets dans l'Eau": I imagine the moon silvering a small grey lake, one of Corot's, shall we say?—and the ripple of Verlaine's poem:

La lune blanche  
Luit dans les bois;  
De chaque branche  
Part une voix  
Sous la ramée,  
Ah, Bien-aimée."

"Ah, Bien-aimée"—but I have a fancy, unlike Omar's, to leave out the slightly boring Well-beloved from beneath any bough that dips and trails over water. Water is company enough.

Offenbach's "Barcarolle," rhythmic and monotonous, was probably pure water-music when heard for the first time on the lagoon, in long lazy waves splashing and receding against the marble steps of Venetian palaces. Has the world grown less lazy but a little wearier since then? Or has the "Barcarolle" lent itself rather too indiscriminately to the waving of English sea-side bandmasters or the many thousand gondoliers who have sung it to enchant their English and American clientele?

Mendelssohn's *Fingal's Cave*, Bax's *Tintagel*, Vaughan William's *Sea Symphony*, and Delius's *Sea Drift* all succeed in carrying us away at moments to places of awe and solitude, out of sight of land, a swinging broken floor of grey and green, veined with foam.

That is the worst of these rhapsodies, you forget the meaning of titles: *Fingal's Cave* and *Tintagel* would hardly be out of

sight of land; *Fingal's Cave* has something of the enchantment of *La Mer*, but the sound is hollower; the waves blindly beat the dark, furious at their confinement between hard walls of rock; till at the end the composer reassures us by a simple trumpet theme to scatter panic.

Mendelssohn, like Handel, has been too benevolently associated with royal personages and royal patronage, during his long sojourn in England; he lived too close to our own times to get away with it and suffer no damage; he should have been an Elizabethan allowed to do his Gloriana stuff, spread his cloak and flourish his humility, and still be awarded immortal honours. The sturdier independence of Beethoven, who could have done with an occasional slice of Prosperity Cake bestowed by royal patrons, would make no such concessions; he would not "do his stuff." Walking with Goethe on the road to Töplitz, outside Vienna, they once encountered a little group of the Empress and her entourage. Goethe instantly withdrew to the side of the road and began bowing low, like a respectful automaton. But Beethoven (he whom I shall ever love best of all) charged like a bull straight through the group, head down, lowing, I imagine, and shaking his horns. What, I wonder, did he say when Goethe presently rejoined him? "*Na*, you *did* look a fool!"—something like that.

He whom I love best of all, has he ever written any water music? Yes, in the *Pastoral Symphony*, "Am Bach"; the shepherds lazing contentedly beside the stream, eating and drinking and making love. The Sixth Symphony was visualized by Disney in his *Fantasia*, but I have completely forgotten in what form and design; so he has won over Dukas, but loses identity when competing with the genius who is Shakespeare in music. Beethoven can smash down all visions except his own.

Composers of wave-music, river-music, brook-music, they would all have shown deep sympathy, I have not the slightest doubt, could they have seen me sitting disconsolate on the plank bridge spanning my own silent stream; every now and then testing the swift current by tossing in marigold-heads to see how the little bright orange boats, far more attractive in capricious movement than standing still in their beds (Is this whimsy?) cleverly eluded all the snags of weed and disappeared under the second bridge at the wild end of the garden. And all the while no sound that even Schubert, with his modest *Büchlein*, could have translated into music . . . till with a rush and an indignant swirl of wings, Donald, Dilly, and Dally, our three ducks (they proved to be feminine only after we had named them), came swooping along the surface of the water, actually being chased, instead of, as usual, paddling along demurely, dipping for succulent bits, heads under, tails up, black mackintosh feet working like mad. What was all this flurry and scurry about, I wondered? They had not even paused to wonder suspiciously if it were safe to pass under the bridge when I sat on it. Then I saw that the sheldrake was after them; a handsome sheldrake, vivid blue and ruddy gold, a romantic stranger who came courting them, I cannot tell from where; still less can I tell why Donald, Dilly, and Dally were so overwhelmed at the mere sight of his brilliant plumage that they had to do all this fugitive stuff.

At a very tender age we were encouraged to recite to a select audience of aunts and Mother's friends, Ella Wheeler Wilcox's bold poem on the passion between a sunbeam and a moonbeam.

The sunbeam wooed with passion.  
 He was a lover bold  
 And his heart was a-fire with a mad desire  
 For the moonbeam pale and cold.

But out of his warm arms startled  
 And stirred by love's first shock,  
 She fled afraid like a trembling maid  
 And hid in the niche of the rock.

But the sunbeam followed and caught her  
 And led her to love's first feast,  
 And they were wed on that rocky bed  
 And the dying day was their priest.

And lo! the beautiful opal,  
 That rare and wonderous gem  
 When the moon and the sun blend into one,  
 Was the child that was born to them.

I have never understood why no adult audience noticed anything in the least bit "unsuitable" about this poem? (Yet I believe I could improve the moral tone by cutting out "And lo"!)

Anyhow, for "sunbeam" read "sheldrake," and for "moonbeam" read "Donald, Dilly, and Dally," and for "the niche of the rock" read "in the henhouse," and you will have a rough idea of what was happening down the silent stream in my garden, that afternoon. A certain famous author once observed, with a twinkle in his blue eyes and a voice which I had learnt nearly always heralded a remark unsuitable to my age: "You *must* draw the line *somewhere*, as Leda said to the drake." . . .

(In our "must-draw-the-line-somewhere" department, I should also place a perfectly incomprehensible notice I once saw over a doorway: "Locomotives must please not enter the building.")

Donald, Dilly, and Dally are not any more my only ducks on the stream. They have had their beaks put well out of joint by the babyhood, childhood and adolescence of eleven black ducklings, unrelated to them except by courtesy, and not much of that. Donald is white, Dilly grey and Dally brown; but our eleven little newcomers were hatched by one of the hens from a sitting of stranger-eggs; and they grew up black with glossy green heads and a brilliant sheen of purple and blue on their wing feathers. They paddle along the stream in a platoon, but scramble up the bank in single file, and in single file they plop back into the water. Eleven plops make quite a cool and pleasant sound (as at Elim, with its twelve wells), so the stream is not as silent as it was. Added to my idiot pastime of launching mari-

gold boats to assure myself that the water is really on the move from its hill source to the sea, I can now also enjoy the equally simple, equally idiot satisfaction of seeing it proved over and over again that water *does* roll off a duck's back; rolls off in glimmering pearls, leaving the feathers completely dry. On further enquiry, I learnt that they have to come ashore and oil their feathers every two or three hours from an almost invisible oil-duct.

Sometimes the eleven waddle in single file across the bridge from the meadow to the terrace, and swirl round the little lead statue of Cupid with only one wing and a mended arm and leg, who stands by the steps shooting his arrows into the willows on the opposite bank.

Cupid used to belong to one of the two small paved gardens in Albany: the one on your right on the pillar-box side, going down the Rope Walk from Piccadilly. The Oldest Trustee, a non-agenarian, confessed to me recently (putting horror into my life where no horror had been before in this particular region) that it was he who, so to speak, had "planted" this special pillar-box when he was a young man; but that unless the residents made frequent enough use of it, "they" might take it away. Never had I heard of anything so sinister! Remove our pillar-box? Take it *away*? By dead of night perhaps. . . . And one morning, sauntering along confidently, letter in hand, it would not be there, and we should have to seek a strange pillar-box right outside the precincts? Surely ours was sacred and immutable? Surely they could not remove it on any trumped-up charge—our own pillar-box which had survived the raids of two wars? Besides, I had an illusion that all pillar-boxes were *always* stuffed full of letters, whenever the postman came on his round to unlock them and shovel their contents into his bag. But since the warning, I watched carefully; and soon after, as the pillar-box door swung open, I caught sight of just five letters lying on its floor. Five, and no more. Of course, and at once, I gave up writing books and wrote nothing but letters, and posted the whole lot



in that box; and I mentioned the matter to all the other residents, who received the implication with no less horror than I, and promised they too would devote their lives to writing letters and posting them in the box by the paved square garden where Cupid once had stood.

I have mentioned before that he had barely survived the raids of the World War, and was in a woe-begone and battered condition when at last he was removed from his pedestal in favour of a slim young bronze Narcissus. I gratefully adopted Cupid and took him down to my cottage, where I set him on the little terrace beside the stream and talked to him tenderly and whimsically: "There, little fellow, you're quite safe now. Shoot your pretty arrows into the willow-branches instead of at Hitler, and forget the din and the danger and the crash of bombs. All bad things come to an end; the war is over; and nothing can touch you here." . . . And so forth and so on, in a style all too easy for one reared on the literature of 1900 to 1914; a style for which Evelyn Waugh supplied the term "sick-making"; and to which Dorothy Parker, reviewing a volume of poems, added the corollary: "At this point, Tconstant Weader fwowed up."

My tendency to look up words in the dictionary is a great deal stronger than a similar craving of many people to leap towards the encyclopedia, which I find always tells me a great deal more than I want to know, so that I long to say: "Cut it short," or "Put a sock in it." The dictionary cuts it very short; it can give me a thrill and a surprise in half a line, though that may be partially because I never learnt Latin and Greek, and therefore know next to nothing of the origin of words nor the startling changes in their meaning from the time when they were first put into currency; only when you have not had a classical education, can you enjoy the thrill, at the age of fifty-seven and five days, of suddenly discovering, for instance, that "thesaurus" (Greek: *thesauros*) means "treasure"; and that Roget's *Thesaurus* was not, as you had hitherto supposed, named after some labyrinthine beast of the pre-historic ages with horns in unusual places and

dragonian tail and knees. I have never yet known the dictionary to let me down on a definition, and usually I find something better than I expected (totally unlike one's first stare, appalled, at the final figure in red ink on the bank statement of one's current account).

*Whim*: a sudden turn or start of the mind, a capricious notion, freak, caprice; a windlass used in mining, a large capstan worked by horses, for raising coal or metal from mines (Icelandic: *hvima*, wander with the eyes). *Whimsical*: full of whims, having odd fancies, freakish, odd in temper, fantastical.

"To wander with the eyes" is a derivation for which Iceland is to be thanked warmly for proving that "whimsical" is obviously a word which has suffered debasement. Musing on why an author has to be so precious careful in these times not to approach within a thousand miles of whimsical, or sick noises would be heard all round, I next attempted to define it myself, hoping that I and the dictionary between us could supply tolerance for a tendency which has come under the censure of an austerer world:

*Whimsical*: a spontaneous presentment of something in a different medium to show it more intimately, more gaily, and perhaps therefore more indulgently than on its straightforward meaning. Though the deliberate or primary object should not be to create amusement, this is often the result. Whimsicality has usually also a diminishing quality, with an element of personal affection designed to arouse indulgence towards the object in question, whether it be animal, vegetable, or mineral.

Chesterton wrote:

When one is fond of anything one addresses it by diminutives, even if it is an elephant or a lifeguardsman. The reason is, that anything, however huge, that can be conceived of as complete, can be conceived of as small. If military moustaches did not suggest a sword or tusks a tail, then the object would be vast because it would be immeasurable. But the moment you can imagine a guardsman you can imagine a small guardsman. The moment you really see an elephant you can call it "Tiny." If you can make a statue of a thing

you can make a statuette of it. These people professed that the universe was one coherent thing; but they were not fond of the universe. But I was frightfully fond of the universe and wanted to address it by a diminutive. I often did so; and it never seemed to mind. Actually and in truth I did feel that these dim dogmas of vitality were better expressed by calling the world small than by calling it large. For about infinity there was a sort of carelessness which was the reverse of the fierce and pious care which I felt touching the pricelessness and the peril of life. They showed only a dreary waste; but I felt a sort of sacred thrift. For economy is far more romantic than extravagance. To them the stars were an unending income of halfpence; but I felt about the golden sun and the silver moon as a schoolboy feels if he has one sovereign and one shilling.

Yet I fear that for all his eloquence, if Chesterton were alive at the present period he would find that whimsicality has not the effect of "a diminishing quality designed to arouse one's personal affections." On the contrary, it seems to goad people into a fierce, a tigerish antagonism. And I would never have dared speak to Cupid as I did, in fact, I would never have dared speak to a little lead statue at all, unless I first diverted the spear-thrusts by doing it in the spirit of mocking burlesque. And yet J. M. Barrie allowed Mary Rose to utter loving words to a rowan-bush:

"Darling rowan-tree, are you glad to see me back? You don't look a bit older, how do you think *I* am wearing? I shall tell you a secret. You too, firry. Come closer, both of you. Put your arms around me, and listen: I am married! . . . But listen, you trees, I have a much more wonderful secret than that. You can have three guesses. It is this. . . . I—have—got—a baby! A girl? No thank you. He is two years and nine months, and he says such beautiful things to me about loving me. Oh, rowan, do you think he means them?"

It would not, however, be quite fair to Barrie unless I counterbalanced this quotation of whimsy as we do not like it, with a wish that everyone should immediately read his impression of Meredith's funeral (in his autobiographical memoir "The Green-

wood Hat"), and be converted; whimsical in its slant on the subject, it is yet so moving and true, such a clear strong vindication of Barrie from the charge of being "an elf without a heart," that I dare not quote less than the whole, and therefore must content myself by continually remembering it with affection and—yes, with pride.

Nevertheless, I decided that I should never quite be able to line up with the School of Tigerish Antagonism unless I could first make myself sick on whimsy; so (after Mary Rose) I took a dose—as much as I could bear—of my own early books, following up with a few other examples from my seniors and contemporaries and the idols of my earliest adoration.

Here's me, honestly reproduced without cuts:

She had stolen forth on tiptoe into the grey dawn-stillness, sped up the long white road, shimmering ghost-like in the half-light, till she reached the wood on the top of the hill. There the trees stood out, dim and gaunt, against a pale grey sky; and, little ragged patches of deeper grey, the October leaves swayed and whispered, and sighed for the night that was over.

Full half their brethren had already blown to the ground; Jaconne could feel them cold and dank beneath her unshod feet. For a moment she stood motionless, listening to the breathless hush about her. . . .

Grey the cobweb canopy which elfin fingers had spun from twig to twig. Grey the soft drizzling rain that fell, like the patter of marionette feet, on the foliage above. An unreal figure in an unreal scene, Jaconne danced on the dew-soaked earth.

Yes, but wait a minute. What about Alice? What about *The Wind in the Willows*? (Remember how Cupid, when I apostrophised him, was standing by a certain immortal stream.) What about *The Sword in the Stone* by T. H. White, which I swear will not suffer from alliance with Lewis Carroll and Kenneth Grahame? What about Hans Andersen?

"Whimsical" at its best, "whimsical" before it became "whimsy," has it slipped past saving? Anyhow, suppose we in-

investigate our present-day reactions, and see how it became debased into a bogus significance; how, in short, it has been corrupted? We have seen that it need not be essentially and in origin bogus; like most things, it depends on intention; on whether our impulse to present something at a whimsical angle, in a whimsical light, in whimsical idiom, on a whimsical slant, by a whimsical vehicle, is spontaneous and sincere, or whether it be basely done for its effect on the hearer, and for motives of profit and expedience? It is not necessary for "whimsical" to be unreal, any more than for its harsh opposites (sardonic, stark) to be real. Cynical, down-to-earth actuality can more subtly be conveyed at times by a whimsical medium, than by running on its own tram-lines. For instance, in *Punch*, a dear wee bunny is talking to a bushy wee squirrel and pointing towards a poor wee skunk left solitary in the distance: "You tell him; he's your friend!" This minor masterpiece of brevity in suggestion (like *The Wind in the Willows*) clearly demonstrates that it need be neither bogus nor sentimental to make animals talk, if their speech be meant as a pungent and sometimes a savage commentary on the foibles of human nature. Only when the animals are actually intended to be animals and nothing else, the writer putting human speech into their mouths in a sort of let's-all-pretend fashion to cadge even more sympathy for their darlingness—only then have I a certain sympathy with the verdict from the School of Grim Reality where "whimsical" deteriorates into "bloody whimsical."

Nevertheless, the over-stark modern episodic method, if it be employed merely to shock the hearer and for other unworthy motives of profit and expedience, is equally open to ridicule by parody; Robin and I collaborated on a brief passage:

He stared at his outstretched hand fascinated, as though it were not his own hand at all; as though it were an object belonging to quite a different person: Old Gobbo, for instance, the hunchback who went crazy last year and had to be taken away. . . . He stared at his hand, fixed, rivetted. One by one the hairs began to rise, slowly,

rhythmically, as though in response to an inexorable force. He noticed almost with indifference that one of the hairs had a tiny drop of sweat at the end of it. It reminded him, he could not remember why, of that dark, smelly little shop where they sold cheeses. . . .

"Chocolate-Box" often has the last word over "Slices-of-Life"; for though I may have determined to squash my juvenile yearnings to be pleased by the whimsical and quaint, still, playing around Cupid only a few yards away from me were the three kittens, Gracie, Tony, and Tiger Tim. And what could be more chocolate-box than kittens (and semi-Persian kittens at that) chasing each other round a Cupid on a little terrace beside a stream? Nor was it of the slightest use telling myself that I had invented them; or that even if by some sick-making conjunction of circumstances they were indeed there, they were not at all charming, graceful, or pleasing to the eye. Sheer chocolate-box, yes. But you cannot eliminate the nature of kittens from the universe by frowning on them and cutting them dead. Kittens are very real indeed. Presently they will catch mice and play with them, let them escape and catch them again before they deal the death-stroke; theology has not yet found a satisfactory answer to that brutal reality. When I am not actually seeing this act going on, I can acquiesce in it, knowing that I am helpless to alter the fundamental processes of nature. When I *do* see it, I make foolish, futile gestures of protest, such as trying to save the mouse, that particular mouse (because I cannot save *all* mice from *all* cats), by grabbing Tony and shutting him up in another room, declaring I hate cats and why do I keep them? All this to be mentally filed under the heading "Fat lot of use." My reactions against the cruelty which I detest and fear (not much merit in this) could go into my "Fat-lot-of-use" column: I eat ducks, though preferably not my own; but I could certainly never eat Donald, Dilly, and Dally; I have known them too long; so they will have to be given away to be eaten by somebody else; if I waited till they died a natural death from old age, I should have to feed them for years; and no-one can afford to do

that nowadays once a duck has affectedly declared: "My dear, my egg-laying days are over!" I have not the remotest notion how long a duck can live, if left to it; I doubt if any domestic duck has ever yet lived out its natural life. I *can* eat my own hens; they are so much less lovable than ducks; and plucked and trussed, when they are brought to the table, there is no connection between them and what I have seen for months strutting and greedily pecking in the meadow.

I may as well go on with this confession of an illogical conscience, now I have begun:

I have always thought I would like to go fishing; learn it properly: how to use the right flies with the right flick of the rod in the right weather. But I do not *want* fish lifted with a hook in their mouths out of their cool, slippery, squameous water-world; at least, not with my hook. Yet I eat fish and like them, caught by other nets and hooks, out of my sight; though I have never particularly enjoyed the merry sight of a lobster rampaging about on a Cornish kitchen floor and pointed out with pride as my dinner-to-be; nor of selecting the plumpest trout from a tank at any little foreign restaurant called La Truite au Bleu. I hate the idea of hunting, because I doubt the assertion that the fox enjoys it, about as much as I doubt what I have also been airily informed: that fish cannot feel pain. How do *you* know? seems to be the answer to both those reassuring extracts from Our Nature Diary. It is, however, sheer sentimentality on my part, even nauseating sentimentality, to dislike cub-hunting more than fox-hunting, and stag-hunting more than either, and otter-hunting most of the lot because otters live in pools and have such a glorious time wallowing and splashing when they are alive; and because there was, moreover, a most sympathetic Otter (Do you remember?) in *The Wind in the Willows*. . . . And can I pretend, sitting on the plank bridging my stream, that I have no personal association with one of the three best whimsical books in the English language? For the same reason—to the realist no reason at all—I do wish dogs and cats would not kill

Ratty nor Mole nor Toad, nor any of their tribe and descendants, in spite of the criminal harm they are alleged to do. I do not include Mr. Badger in the same enchanting band, for I doubt if I have ever seen a badger; though he is the character in *The Wind in the Willows* whom I would most wish to resemble for the respect he commands without the slightest effort and even when his mouth is full:

By this time they were all three talking at once, at the top of their voices, and the noise was simply deafening, when a thin, dry voice made itself heard, saying, "Be quiet at once, all of you!" and instantly every one was silent. It was the Badger, who, having finished his pie, had turned round in his chair and was looking at them severely. When he saw that he had secured their attention, and that they were evidently waiting for him to address them, he turned back to the table again and reached out for the cheese. And so great was the respect commanded by the solid qualities of that admirable animal, that not another word was uttered until he had quite finished his repast and brushed the crumbs from his knees. The Toad fidgeted a good deal, but the Rat held him firmly down.

When the Badger had quite done, he got up from his seat and stood before the fireplace, reflecting deeply.

To finish up this bout of somewhat shameful fat-lot-of-usage, I have a horror and a hatred of wasps beyond all other insects; but when I scream "Don't kill it!", I am not symbolising Humanity Triumphant Over Terror; only that my nausea of wasps functions just as much for a wasp dead or dying as alive and harmful; if somebody told me that a large nest of wasps was being destroyed down the garden and *out of my sight*, I should rejoice extremely.

"And now we will take you back" . . . not to the Studio, but to the eternal declaration of mischief and chocolate-box in the spectacle of three kittens deliciously frolicking round a little leaden Cupid; a whimsical aspect occasionally superimposed on the cold, cynical, self-seeking reality of cat dormant in every kitten. Cupid, by the way, has been resident with us in the



country, quiet and safe and happy, for several months. In addition to his damaged leg and arm, he has now only one wing, and the other shoulder looks a bit mutilated.

Queer! he had both his wings when I brought him down from bomb-shattered London.

The joke is on me, if you can call it a joke; the Providential idea being, I presume, to teach me not to be whimsical, not to be sentimental, not to be sick-making, not to apostrophise a little lead statue of Cupid from a secret ante-room of my (more or less) adult mind, telling him he had stood up gallantly to the German bombers and that now danger was over and here was only the rippling stream, here were only the murmuring willows. . . .

And here, apparently, were four or five playful young bullocks for whose pasturage I had lent my meadow. They had broken through the inadequate fence one afternoon while I was away, a week or two after Cupid had been transported to the cottage; crossed the plank bridge, kicked up some clods of the lawn and left traces on a couple of gladioli, but on the whole, their gyrations did very little damage before they were driven out again . . . except that they knocked down Cupid, smashed his quiver, and broke off a wing.

*Nothing* is safe; nowhere is safe; reality wins. The barbed wire which I had refused to put up between the garden and the stream because it reminded me too hideously of wars and the War, would at least have protected Cupid from the marauders in the meadow. . . . They would again have to be kept back by more definite warlike frontiers than trust and prettiness. Escapism in 1947 is no good; no good being whimsical or chocolate-box or symbolic or quaint; we must still and always remember, even during our brief hour of recreation, that the bullocks came over. And that Cupid, who lost an arm and a leg in London during the war, has lost a wing and his quiver in the country during the peace.

Gracie and Tiger Tim had to be given away. One kitten, growing by inexorable stages into a cat, is enough for any household. Gracie, pearl-grey and fluffy and blue-eyed as a baby, turned out, fortunately, to be a boy as well, though it was as difficult to change her name as to reconsider Donald when he first laid an egg. Some friends had a cat who had been called Hector, and then went on to supply kittens in plenty; ever hopeful, they carefully decided on which kitten to keep, and named him Achilles. But things turned out otherwise . . . and *her* heel was vulnerable, too. This is a poem which Browning might have written, called "Any Owner to Any Cat."

I have only once, as yet, written a story entirely about a cat; it was for a lucrative reason: I had been asked to contribute to a series of tales of horror. In this tale I frightened myself so much that I prevented myself from ever having a cat to sleep in my room. Though (unlike dogs) they walk by themselves, they do form their queer cat attachments to the person who is nearest when they sleep and when they eat; so no cat ever singles me out, saying "her and none other," which makes me sad and cross. But I can still take exquisite pleasure in the sight of them at their sports and antics—except at the mousehole. The perpetual grace of a cat in movement is a thing which makes the ballet superfluous, and as an endlessly new amazement, calls for endless thanksgiving.

Mousehole is a fishing-village in Cornwall, celebrated for its excellent male choir. Yet whenever I see a poster announcing "Chorus of Male Choir of Mousehole," such is the force of association that I could only visualize them as in *The Wind in the Willows*, a collection of mice wearing check mufflers, standing in a semi-circle with their music held far out in their paws, earnestly singing carols.

*The Wind in the Willows* (again) probably accounts for my obstructive attitude to having my own willows pollarded. I am told by gardeners, amateur and professional, that unless I have

them done every year, being very old, the gales of winter are likely to break them under the weight of their own branches. But if they are pollarded, I cannot hear the wind rustle through; and neither to hear music in the stream, nor murmur in the willows that border the stream, empties my nights of too much that can give me pleasure during those hours when I lie awake and my thoughts are no pleasure at all. When once I did consent to the pollarding, I behaved very badly at the sight of those unsightly stumps, with their short little twigs growing out in a rather ridiculous fashion, instead of their shower and fountain of delicate ginger-gold. I uttered cries of desolation and reproach to those responsible for making me give the order; and lacking any sprinkle of shade from the willows on either side of the plank where I love to sit, went to sit instead in a dead block of shade from the cottage, where I continued to mope or glare when anyone assured me they would grow again. And they *did* grow again; and I rejoiced in the sight of them by day, and their swish and murmur by night; and the following autumn I was gaily defiant, refusing to let them be pollarded; and the following winter, the wild winter of 1947, two of them broke in the storm and crashed down right across the stream, just as "they" had foretold. Leaving me to wonder, sorrowfully averting my eyes from the wreck of a living willow, why people who know about these things are so often right in the end, unlike those who (like myself) do not know and hope for the best.

I feel much the same antagonism over pruning and thinning out and cutting back. My lilies of the valley have been "thinned out," and I feel sure will never again grow in such abundance, in their bed of long green leaves, cool and pointed. It may have been whimsical to have enjoyed plunging my bare arms down among these leaves and discovering a stem of shining white bells, invisible till the green is parted. And drastic pruning terrifies me just as much; that Gloire de Dijon rose which climbed and rambled so abundantly over the terrace wall of the cottage . . . I grant that it had to be pruned, but I could easily have tossed up

my arms and cried "Woel Woel" with ominous prophecies of its meagre future, like the chorus in a Greek drama.

Here is a contemporary's picture of Mrs. and then Mr. Robert Louis Stevenson at Bournemouth, separately doing their pruning act:

To their immediate neighbours the Stevensons were never widely known; and there are very few of us left now who knew Skerryvore in its glory. The last local man who used to find pleasure in talking over those happy days with me was Mr. John Phillips, a nurseryman who, during their absence, took care of the garden.

Just before they went off to the Adirondacks in August, 1887, Mrs. Stevenson sent for him, and in my presence gave him her parting instructions.

Her closing words, very gravely spoken, were calculated to defy oblivion. Turning suddenly to me, she said:

"And, as this lady will always be about the place while we are away, I solemnly charge her, if she should ever see you making use of a pruning knife on my creepers, to snatch it from your hand and plunge it into your heart."

With unruffled calm, while a slow, broad smile spread over his face, Mr. Phillips replied: "Very good, madam."

He was looking hot and tired, but eager and happy as a small child. In his long thin hands he waved a pruning knife, which had evidently been plied with vigour. The *Sine qua non*, who had been detained for a few days by business in London, had, when her summons came, loudly bewailed the necessity of starting just as she was preparing to prune her raspberries for the first time. R. L. S., who was an artist in this way when dealing with literature, had no skill in horticulture, and with torn and bleeding fingers, had hacked those poor plants to pieces. I, being nearly as ignorant as he, still felt a hideous misgiving. The next day it was my turn to track Fanny to the raspberry patch. I found her the picture of woel! Every bearing shoot was cut off: not a raspberry would Skerryvore have "off the estate." I never saw her more distressed. She did so love everything that her hands had planted. It was as if a thriving young family had been massacred by their father's hand. Suddenly we heard a step approaching. "Hush," she cried, "Louis must never know what he has done. He did it to surprise me, and thinks it has been a splendid day's work." The next moment she was radiant, and I do not think one doubt of his success ever crossed the amateur gardener's mind. He often talked eagerly about the raspberries they hoped to harvest.

You may ask why Fanny Stevenson should be so much more strong-minded and sensible over this pruning business than myself. But, you see, Fanny gardened; she did not merely look on at gardening and take a deep interest and delight in what came of gardening; Fanny had a right to say what should and should not be done; a right earned fairly and squarely by the sweat of her brow and the blisters on her hands. I love my garden and appreciate whatever it may choose to give me in all weathers and at all seasons, but I have neither the strength, the time, the experience, nor, I fear, the inclination to do much more than pay the piper; which in gardening emphatically and quite properly means you do not call the tune—nor call off the pruning knife.

Fortunately the glory of my corner of Brambleford spreads out into the three magnificent chestnut trees on a triangle of rough grass in the road just beyond the porch and front gate; and these, beyond my jurisdiction, do not have to be pruned or pollarded. Everyone knows what chestnuts look like in bud and green leaf and blossom, so I can skip the description (as we do for the first thirty odd pages of a Scott novel) and pass straight on to October, when they display a very special quality of transformation scene; at least, two of them do; the other tree only turns a handsome yellow, like all chestnuts; but the third has leaves of darkest green that change to glowing garnet; and the tree directly outside the window facing west from my bedroom, in the autumn of 1945 changed its green into clusters of a light, brilliant coral shade, such as I had never before seen on any chestnut. A countryman instructed me that this was due to having its roots deep in the water of the stream which ran far below; so that the following autumn I looked forward to the same flamboyant event, and at first was bitterly disappointed when that particular tree merely passed into a somewhat lighter yellow than other chestnuts. But then it occurred to me, a thrilling relief from disappointment, that its strange coral of the previous October must therefore have been an isolated miracle, not a sturdy decla-

ration of nature to be repeated punctually, till it ceased to bring amazement. I believe I am happier in the miracle, for every year it will mean a state of pleasing suspense.

The children from the school over the way are sent out before lessons on crisp bright mornings to do gymnastics, or play an active game for ten minutes round and under these chestnut trees. Their bright suits flashing in and out of the patches of sun and shade make a cheerful view, like a Randolph Caldecott picture-book; and when they have gone in, an artist still could find something to occupy him, with a scarlet cart and grey horse in the farmyard opposite, a straw rick, moving patches of white geese, and a string of race-horses that clop along the chequered road; all the Caldecott properties. If the four chestnut trees seem indispensable to the school-children, the jockeys, and all that I view with much affection from that window, yet I still would not emulate the possessive passion of the maiden lady whose will I saw in the *Times*: She wished her house, The Chestnuts, to be demolished, the trees cut down, the fences and stone paving removed, and the land sold; but it "may not be built on for fifty years after my death." A strange fury of desire, that ownership should continue after life itself. We can all chatter of "my trees," "my rose bushes," "my lawn," "my stream," but surely only a few of us, pausing to think, can *mean* "my," believe in it, attend to its claim with quite such literal autocracy.

A kindlier old lady lives on in our local history by a clause in her will that also had about it a fantastic touch: she provided a fund for a curfew bell to be rung all through the winter at eight o'clock, so that people who are lost on the Downs in the darkness may be guided safely home. We mused on how it would work out if a second eccentric and moneyed old lady, with an objection to what *she* deemed unnecessary clangour to disturb the quietness, should die and leave an even larger legacy for curfew *not* to be rung at eight every night? Imagine the predicament of the vicar, and of the two schools of opposing thought regarding people lost on the Downs. The whole affair should be

illustrated by Thurber; you may remember his Curfew series of the frantic lady attaching herself to the clapper and being hurled to and fro.

While idly standing by the window looking down at the chestnut trees, I saw an encounter, just before Easter one year, between the fishmonger's van and a friend's car arriving to fetch away his baby who had developed whooping-cough while staying with us. And out of what I saw and fancied I saw, as authors will, I built up a story.

The van and the small Morris car collided at the bend of the country road where a trio of chestnut trees stood on a triangle of grass. Both were about to pull up at the gate of the same cottage, so no serious damage was done; only the radiator and one of the wings slightly bent. But with a jarring of brakes both came to a standstill. Mr. Ladd the fishmonger and Tom Parry were for separate reasons in a state of overwrought nerves; they sprang from their seats, strode up to each other, and began to shout:

"Look here, why the hell couldn't you—"

"Damn it, didn't you see—"

"Some people oughtn't to be driving at all."

"Some people make the roads impossible."

"—Should report you. Never a policeman about when he's wanted."

"All right then; go on, report me. What for? It was you who—"

"No need for all that blasted hurry."

"How d'you know there was no need? There *is* need, and no harm in being in a hurry if you know how to drive."

The front door of the cottage opened and people came tumbling out: the cook, a woman with a pram, another younger woman.

"Oh, Mr. Ladd, I'm so glad you've brought the fish."

"Tom, you made it in good time. I wasn't expecting you for another half-hour."

"Hallo, Judy, how's the nipper?"

"Not too good. Coughing all night. That's why I thought it best to phone Mildred this morning to send you to fetch him back. If he's caught it, he's caught it, and they might as well be nursed together."

Tom nodded, declined a drink, said he would prefer a cup of coffee.

Mrs. Burt, the cook, promised to get it ready if he could just wait while she fetched a dish for Mr. Ladd.

Judy and the other girl began to bring out cot and pram and basket and other baby paraphernalia, which Tom with a glum brow (though it was obvious he was trying to be good-natured and philosophical) helped to stow in the car.

"I'll throw back the roof, same as I did when we came down last week, and then he can sleep in his cot."

Mrs. Burt came running out with a large dish which she brought around to the fishmonger, all pleasant expectation; Judy left Tom for the moment to struggle alone with the roof, and joined her:

"Well, Mr. Ladd, what have you got for us?"

Sole and salmon, turbot and plaice . . . you could almost see the darting shadows of these fair fish lazily gliding through translucent waters, unaware of the boat and the net, unaware of doom, and Good Friday.

"Cod," replied Mr. Ladd, morose and despondent; "only cod; 'less you'd prefer whiting?" And now they all knew why he had not smiled and cracked a joke with them as he usually did. Mr. Ladd was a friendly fishmonger and enjoyed the sight of their pleasure over his prime stock-in-trade.

"Only cod? Cod means fish-pie; no fat for fishcakes, even. Oh, dear, I'm so *bored* with fish-pie."

"Can't give you what I haven't got." It was strange to hear their favorite Mr. Ladd, of all tradesmen, so surly.

"No Dover sole?"

"No dratted well anything sole."



"No plaice or halibut? Or at least—" they racked their brains to think of what fish could rank midway between salmon and cod. "No haddock? No lemon sole?"

Mr. Ladd lost his temper: "If I had them, I'd give them to you, wouldn't I? Don't bury fish, do I? Don't play hide and seek with fish, do I? Wouldn't do me much good, would it, to poke 'em under the flap and eat them all myself? D'you think *I'm* not bored with saying 'Nothing but cod' wherever my van goes. I tell you what it is: I can leave folks without fish all the year and they'd not mind, but disappoint 'em Good Friday—"

Just below the surface of his anger he was obviously so mortified that Judy and Mrs. Burtt and the other girl in chorus spoke words of comfort and encouragement. Mr. Ladd nearly broke down.

"They'll think I'm doing it on purpose; natural they should. Fifteen tons I expected yesterday and another fifteen tons this morning, and do you know what they've sent me? Five. Five one day; four the next. And then none of it prime. Means my Best Customers, they'll go to another man for the rest of the year."

"But Mr. Ladd," repeated the other girl, touched by his honest sorrowful look, "it's not your fault that no nice fish has arrived."

"Ah, but folks don't argue that way, you see. Folks are all for flat fish."

Mrs. Burtt cut in, crisp and indignant:

"Ought to be ashamed, greedy gutses, for wanting nice fish on Good Friday. It *ought* to be dull and disagreeable, exactly what it is."

Mr. Ladd looked puzzled. He had not viewed it in that light, for he held a genuine affection for his Old Customers, his Best Customers; and he always maintained that there was something about sole (perhaps its flatness) that melted the very bowels, whereas the lack of sole turned the heart to granite.

By then, two medium-sized cod had been transferred to the dish, where they lay more than usually limp and charmless, their heads drooping over the side.

Judy had run indoors, hearing through the open window that the sick baby was awake and crying in short monotonous squawks, as though at the prospect of the long drive impending, mile after jolting mile.

Mrs. Burt tendered a pound note.

"Got no change?"

"No. Haven't you?"

"Not so much as a sixpence."

"I'll see what Judy's got. There's the phone." The girl disappeared into the house, and Mrs. Burt bore the dish with its dead freight round the back way to the kitchen.

Mr. Ladd was left miserably staring at the meagre remains on the flap he had let down; thinking of old times and the gleaming array of noble fish, beautiful fish, delicate fish, rare fish, which had once delighted all eyes.

Tom finished turning back his hood, and for the moment had nothing to do; so he wandered over to the van and offered Mr. Ladd a cigarette. "Rough luck," he said sympathetically; "couldn't help hearing what you said."

"Thanks. Seems you got your troubles too. Whooping-cough, is it? Nice way to spend Easter."

"Nice way to spend petrol," Tom complained, feeling that a grumble with one of his own sex might relieve his feelings and at the same time not convict him of want of heart. "I'd been saving up my ration for weeks, and I was going off on my own for a really good fishing holiday. All fixed up; I know a grand little stretch of water right off the beaten track. But now—"

"Quite a trip, down from London and back again."

"Twice," corrected Tom confidentially, leaning his elbows on the flap, oblivious of the gluey scales that clung to his suit.

"No! *Twice!* Too bad. Bit thick, twice."

"Four days ago I drove the kid down here to friends, to get him clean away from his brother who had whooping-cough. Just a chance then, if we were quick enough, that he'd

escape catching it. No joke, at his age. But now he's coughing, there's no sense in keeping them apart any longer, and he's best back with his mother. Might as well be kept up all night with two as with one." He tried to make a joke of it; but Mr. Ladd, not lacking in imagination, could feel as keenly his comrade's disappointment over the wrecked holiday as he himself felt his Best Customer's disappointment over no fish but cod.

"Lucky it happened at Easter," he remarked, with a clumsy attempt to console.

"Lucky?"

"Lucky for your wife, I mean. One can't get off from one's job ordinary times; and she'll be glad to have you there to give her a hand, specially at night." But even as he spoke, he imagined the endless nights of Friday, Saturday, Easter Sunday, Monday Bank Holiday, sitting up with a woman white and exhausted and strained with anxiety; fetch this, fetch that; hold this, hold that; no time for tenderness in all the urgency of retching and fever; fetch the basin, empty the basin; fetch the thermometer, fetch another pillow, fetch the doctor. . . . He seemed a nice bloke, too; wouldn't let the missus down, nor leave her to scramble through it by herself.

Suddenly Mr. Ladd's own heart was light. Compared with what his companion had to bear, it seemed a very little matter just to drive round disappointing customers and meeting their reproaches with repetition of the same boring story; boring to him, catastrophic to them. After all, his kids were grown-up and got over their whooping-cough long ago; safely through the war too, both of them. He and the old girl had quiet nights now.

Smoking in silence, but a friendly and not an ominous silence as before, Tom was oddly enough working out the same sum, only in reverse. After all, he was fond of his kids; and if a man had a family, well, up to him to see them through the bad patches. Presently they would be better; presently they would be lively again, running round in the sun and getting into mischief. And he was lucky in having come back from the

war to an interesting job, where they were human and would let him off a bit beyond the holidays if need be; better, anyhow, than dragging up and down the country with a load of dead cod, five tons instead of fifteen, and eternally hearing people grumble for flatter and yet flatter fish; when it was not your fault, when you were dependent on the whims of the government or the weather or whatever "they" chose to send. Seemed a thoroughly nice chap, too. Companionable.

They might have stood for a symbolic tableau of Sympathy, standing there in the vivid green shade of the chestnuts, both silently occupied with the male point of view, not theirs but the other man's. Standing there in a spell of queer contentment which twenty minutes ago, when they had crashed and jarred and shouted, would have seemed impossible.

Such quiet had to be broken. Judy came running out, and Mrs. Burt come running out, breathlessly and together apologising for the delay. There had been two phone calls; one, local, a message for Mr. Ladd from the Honorable Mrs. Murray: "She guessed you'd be calling here before you came to her as it's on your way, and she says please would you keep her *eight* Dover soles instead of five as ordered, because she's got three extra for supper and they've been prisoners of war all these years so she wants to give them something very special!" And almost before Mrs. Murray had got through her message, she had been, so to speak, elbowed out of the way by a long-distance call from London. "Tom, Mildred says, and I'm afraid she's right and I should have thought of it, baby mustn't travel in an open car, however warmly we wrap him up; not with perhaps whooping-cough started. So the pram will have to be strapped on behind somehow, and he can be in his cot inside the closed car. I'm so sorry you've already got it all prepared the other way."

"Doesn't matter," Tom muttered. And began moodily jerking out the pram and looking for a piece of rope, letting down his luggage carrier and hauling up the hood. Mr. Ladd, also with a thundercloud weighing him down, banged up the flap of the van;

and without any spring in limbs which had suddenly become elderly with the prospect of disobliging kind Mrs. Murray, climbed to his seat, while he swore aloud to the surrounding scenery that he had had enough, that he was going to retire and sell the business at once; he wasn't going to have his heart broken year after year; why should he? He turned the van and had begun to drive slowly up the leafy road, when he heard his name called. Tom was running after him:

"Hi, stop a moment!"

Mr. Ladd pulled up and waited.

"I just wondered," Tom began diffidently, "I just wondered, dunno why, but it sort of came into my head—if you really *mean* you're going to retire—or at least take it easier—and it's not likely, is it, that the kids will be ill next Easter too, and they say there'll be plenty of petrol by then—I wondered if next Easter you'd come fishing?" He felt a bit awkward as to the propriety of inviting a fishmonger to come fishing. So without any more ado, he blurted: "Care about it? If not, say so."

Mr. Ladd's face was all in a glow. "You bet I would. Funny thing, seeing what I am, but I've never *been* fishing and always wanted to. Come to that, no-one's ever asked me before. I was taken to see a man's private aquarium once; and there's a res-terong where they keep lobsters alive in a tank and get 'em up when and as wanted for the table, but that's different."

"Quite different," Tom laughed. Hastily they swopped addresses; Mr. Ladd cranked up the motor and drove off; and Tom ran back to the cottage, where a whimpering infant was being carefully carried out, down to the gate and car.

One dare not be so obvious as to say: "And now, dear Reader, what is the moral behind this story?" "Let's get together" sounds too facile a remedy for all evil and soreness, whether as the happy result of a collection under the chestnut trees, or expanded symbolically to include all racial, national, and "class" misunderstanding. (We have, I think, reached a stage in history where "class"

goes into inverted commas as one of those departed Old World fragrances.) Besides, "getting together" so often means no more than rowdy conviviality supplied by a plethora of booze, and as quickly subsiding in the open air. I do, however, remember an occasion in November, 1941, when a whole lot of us by chance fused our memories of three wars, in the bar parlour of one of the five inns of Brambleford, and got together into a spontaneous cavalcade of patriotic songs.

The old Water-Cress Man began it by suddenly singing "John Peel":

"Yes, I ken John Peel and Ruby too,  
Ranter and Ringwood, Bellman and True,  
From a find to a check, from a check to a view,  
From a view to a death in the morning."

Hounds have a knack of attracting to themselves names of which we would say "how absurdly inappropriate," until we realise that by virtue of being in a pack, they could not possibly have been christened with more charming suitability: Waterloo, Wanderer, and Whirligig (these were in the catalogue of Mr. Trelawney's hounds); Famous and Careless, Chorister, Melody, Dulcimer, Concord. . . .

Concord indeed, with a thick clammy mist outside, increasing the genial atmosphere in the bar. I have forgotten why he was the Water-Cress Man, for I had never seen him picking it in the neighbouring beds where cress was gathered for the market. Perhaps he went farther afield, or perhaps he had retired from active water-cressing. He passed on from "John Peel" to "John Bull," singing it with fervour; what is more, he knew the words. According to him, "John Bull," unknown to the rest of us, came into favour in 1902; possibly he was a couple of years late in his estimate, and it dated from the Boer War period. So then our company fell into argument as to which were "the best war-songs"? Best for what? For national inspiration? For marching along the roads? To gain recruits? Or simply the most catchy tunes, the easiest to remember?

I was rather strong, myself, on songs of the Boer War; having been a child with an adhesive memory for all that was useless in exams, from Shylock's speech on the Rialto to "The Absent-Minded Beggar":\*

When you've shouted Rule Britannia,  
When you've sung God Save the Queen,  
When you've finished killing Kruger with your mouth—

"What I'd do to Kruger," "What I'd do to the Kaiser," "What I'd do to that there Hitler!"—precious little difference.

He's an absent-minded beggar, and his weaknesses are great,  
But we—and Paul—must take him as we find him.

"Oom Paul," "Little Willie," and then "Adolf Schicklgruber."

He's out on active service, wiping something off a slate,  
But he's left a lot of little things behind him.  
Cook's son, Duke's son, son of a belted Earl—

Oh, yes, conscious of our democracy, every inch of us!

Fifty thousand horse and foot, going to Table Bay—

And we thought fifty thousand a lot!

Pass the hat for your credit's sake, and  
pay, pay, *pay!*

And still we pay, pay, pay, pay, pay, pay. . . .

Boer War songs were mostly sentimental: the soldier perpetually bidding farewell to his best girl; "Good-bye, Dolly, I Must Leave You," "Good-bye Little Girl, Good-bye"; and a basin of slop reminiscent of a certain gallant Bugler Dunne, boy hero of the South African war: the song was called "A Little Boy Called Taps," and I warbled it with immense feeling. Finally, I pro-

\* From *Rudyard Kipling's Verse*, by Rudyard Kipling. Copyright, 1900, by Rudyard Kipling, reprinted by permission of Mrs. George Bambridge and Doubleday & Company, Inc.

duced a gem of the period that caused tears to stream down from all present in the inn parlour that morning:

"The Boers have got my Daddee,  
My soldier Dad;  
I don't like to hear my Mammy sigh,  
I don't like to see my Mammy cry,  
So—  
I'm going in the big ship  
Across the bounding main,  
I'm a-going to fight the Boers, I am,  
And bring my Daddee home again."

The Great War of 1914 produced a rowdier crop. The bar rang with reminiscences of "Maddermerzell from Armenteers," and choruses on our English, characteristic I-don't-fink note of "Oh, oh, oh, it's a luvverly war" and "I want to go home." There was a sentimental group of songs, too; this time not so much a soldier or sailor saying good-bye to his girl, as songs of endless weariness, of the long, long roads, the long, long trails. . . . More genuine, less sticky than the Boer War lot. "It's a long way to Tipperary, it's a long way to go." . . . Homesickness will always sound genuine, whatever and wherever the war.

This present war (I wrote "present" by accident) produced mighty few songs, and those mostly on inconsequential subjects, not grouped forlornly round sweethearts or endless roads that lead away from home and Leicester Square. "Lily Marlene" was oddly filched from the Germans; "Waltzing Matilda" came from the Australians; "The Yanks are coming . . . and we won't go back till it's over, over there"—no, that was in 1917, not in 1942. "Run, Rabbit, Run," "Roll Out the Barrel," "We'll Hang Out the Washing on the Siegfried Line"—but these were too cocksure; we celebrated our victories too early and had to do some quick embarrassed erasures.

One of the party asserted: "Say what you like, the best of them was Ivor Novello's 'Keep the Home Fires Burning'; and at once I became disputatious, and asserted that *my* choice of the best



song of three wars was Noel Coward's "London Pride," both words and tune, though I conceded it had never been adopted into such popularity by barrel-organs, whistling errand-boys, restaurant bands, and soldiers marching. Why not? Maybe because it was a shade too tricky, too subtle, for universal appeal. However, not wishing to give the other side a chance to retort: "Then in that case, it's *not* the best war song," I merely replied vaguely: "It's different in this war, because of the radio," in the same way as one says, "Because of the cows," when disputing against double summer-time.

The verses lie flat and inanimate on the page, badly needing the tune to lift them into life and into the queer kinship with all other Londoners that "got me" not only the first or second time I ever heard it, but even now, long after the war and the raids and the black-out are over.

## CHAPTER V London Pride

"London Pride" never became first favourite of the barrel-organ public; the typical Londoner, cheerful, cocky, truculent, unconscious that tenderness exists in him, is liable to shy away at any mention of love for his city, made not only articulate but romantic. The true Londoners, the unconscious Londoners, are not by nature nostalgic; an embarrassed sort of grin is the nearest they come to confess that they are homesick when far away; and they prefer to sing about streets, not districts; neither Mayfair nor Covent Garden, but "Farewell, Leicester Square" and "Knocked 'em in the Old Kent Road." The first *London Pride*, by Neil Lyons, a cockney play put on by Gerald du Maurier during the war of 1914-1918, swaggered and shuffled nearer the popular demand. Nevertheless, another group of Londoners exist, ruefully conscious of London as their beloved city and therefore less blessed, as the conscious must always be, though none the less sincere; and for us "London Pride" has words as well as music. The lyric is haunted by the air or else the air by the lyric, I cannot tell which, for when I heard them they were already wedded.

I have been trying to find one adjective, one alone (for a string is always a confession of failure), to express just what it is about a tune that will not lie down and rest in one's memory like many a nobler composition, but starts up at all sorts of inopportune moments, and trips up forgetfulness, as a string mischievously drawn taut across your path will send you sprawling. Not wistful, not plangent, certainly not gay and not wholly sad, it has achieved a tapping rhythm ("Cockney feet mark the beat of history") . . . mournful, cheeky, elusive—no, the word scampers away, and it is easier to shape an impression of the verses to which it has been

matched, a series of pictures flipped over rapidly as we used to flip those little penny books of black and white pictures, until they actually gave an illusion of being on the move. Débutante, huddling her evening cloak a little closer round her bare shoulders, chilly yet nonchalant after dancing, chilly in the early morning of a Mayfair street, going home while the sparrows come cheeping out into the road, is shown as characteristically on her usual beat as Liza wheeling her barrow, a-jolt on the cobbles of Covent Garden to meet daylight at the same hour; Liza chucking quips left and right at the Cockney girls and men of Covent Garden: drays being unloaded, crates packed and unpacked: pale green vegetables, pale golden fruit; one or two spill and roll along the ground to be crushed under the wheels; the special warm, bruised, fruity smell that hangs in the air at Covent Garden, where the hum of day is beginning, as hum of night was ending in Mayfair. And here too the sparrows are hopping unscared at the turmoil going on around them.

. . . The pictures fade; the little books are flipped to the last page.

"London Pride," with all its pictorial possibilities, should have been included in a Coward revue. It was meant to be seen as well as heard, but it was left to a take-it-or-leave-it birth in a radio programme. Unluckily, if he had waited and used it in *Sigh No More*, it would already have been out of date. *Sigh No More*, as its title implies, was a post-war revue: and the title was prematurely designed for reassurance. But a revue should never be benevolent or reassuring. The function of the revue-writer, as of the cartoonist, is to chastise; there is a danger that should the entertainment be too gay and sparkling, the audience will pick up the fun and reject the satire and the lesson, beguiled by the author into a comfortable assumption that whips and scorpions are for the other fellow. To be charming and to devise escape from worry and monotony is not quite enough. Every member of the audience, well-entertained, should nevertheless be slightly

conscious of a tingling as of nettle-stings concealed in that hedge-row of flowers; a call to sanity; a secret consciousness that here and there ridicule may be justified and it were better to apply self-examination instead of balm. If the audience goes home feeling entirely whole and happy and complacent, then the revue, however brilliant, is not quite all it should be, for it will have missed its essential function and usefulness. From this point of view, it is hardly the right form of entertainment for a convalescent nation. In 1945 we were barely even convalescent, and Noel went gently and spared us. But perverse audiences preferred him lash in hand. Hence it was not a perfect revue.

It is as difficult to define the perfect revue in exact terms as it would be to tell a small child what sends the balloon up. Call it at its best a means to prevent our national or individual excesses corrected by laughter; a series of episodes, songs, and sketches run in fearless commentary on Time the Present, its exaggerations and solemnities:

"Invest me in my motley, give me leave  
To speak my mind . . ."

Here was Jaques, or rather Shakespeare, obviously craving for the revue form which had not yet been invented. All his clowns, with their wry sense of topical futility, seemingly as urgent in Elizabethan days as in the twentieth century, were but forerunners of the actors in modern revue. The masque of the period was surely an attempt to find a formula, but in deference to court patronage, it became too formal. Revue should be fluid and disrespectful, such as Gilbert and Sullivan's *Patience* mocking at the influence of Oscar Wilde and the aesthetic movement; enjoyable as it was, however, it could nowadays have been contracted into one feature on a revue programme. And to judge from a brilliant third act of devastating epigram in the Edwardian setting of *Lady Windemere's Fan*, Wilde could have retorted with a most effective rapier had he been given a chance to use it in revue.

In Victorian times, musical comedy, pantomime, operetta and

burlesque all had the same end in view: the deflation of Pomp and Circumstance; poking fun at social fashion directly it trespassed beyond a certain border-line. Yet musical comedy, with all its irrelevancies, has to be strung along some sort of a story; the Pantomime has to return every now and then with a jerk to its original fairy-tale; the music-hall sequence of separate turns is held together by nothing but the building that surrounds it. Revue would seem to be equally without coherence; nevertheless it is invisibly threaded together by the mind of the author. This is essentially true when, as in the case of Noel Coward, he also writes the lyrics and music and directs the whole production. His personality indicates the missing coherence, supplies that brief intimate liaison between the stage and the auditorium. With Herbert Farjeon, who unfortunately died in 1945 and left us so much the poorer, he is our leading creator of that swift, shuttle collaboration to and fro across the footlights.

What, then, have we learnt to expect in intimate revue? First of all, a detestation of everything that is pretentious and bogus; a ruthless exposure by lucid definition, followed by devastating mockery of subject.

One would like to hear and see a revue with words by Evelyn Waugh, who possesses all the qualifications, cruelty and genius thrown in.

We are most inclined to use our puncturing apparatus when the wrong sort of patriots write (or sing or recite or make speeches) about England. "Many successive generations must watch by the great Mother's bed, changing guard through her long travail, holding her undisturbed, while a bit of perfect country matures in her plenteous breast." . . . This is more like (bad) French than (bad) English; I have heard French orators do it, not insincerely. I tried to explain to a Frenchman once why a similar piece of newspaper prose made our toes curl up, but failed for lack of an equivalent French idiom. They cannot quite locate our sensitive places, and make the kindest of gestures to spare us where our hides are, in fact, tough and pickled. I be-

lieve it was about 1908, that a company of ambitious barn-stormers in a little French town, after performing on successive nights *Cyrano de Bergerac* and *Don César de Bazin*, put on *Joan of Arc* for the third night; but because an English family were present who had lived in the neighbourhood for many years, the actor who was cast for the English soldier (called "Beell") played his villainous part with many apologetic looks and smiles in their direction to indicate that they need not take this insult to their nation seriously; and at the end, while Joan was being burnt, they inserted "Rule, Britannia" into the incidental music as a compliment to the English ladies in the second row.

I suppose the theatre might go too far if equivalent displays of tact and courtesy to spare people's patriotic susceptibilities were to result, for instance, in *Macbeth* toned down to an amiable innocence whenever played to a Scots audience; or else making it clear, in Denmark, that Hamlet's uncle was either not a true Dane, or else did not really poison his brother in the orchard except as a sort of joke softened to the audience by a quantity of nods and becks and wreathed smiles. . . .

But this is going to upset people who are religious about *Hamlet*. I am ready at any time to be religious about *King Lear* or *Othello*, but less about the other two of Shakespeare's Big Four; only, of course, in discussing the story and incidents of the story; and taking for granted that the speeches and the thoughts behind them are beyond criticism, as they are beyond any selection of adjectival phrase. But if ever I have found myself in the hottest of hot water, it was when I mentioned too light-heartedly my theory that Ophelia, far from being mad, was fed up with her fiancé's pretense of insanity—"Get thee to a nunnery" and all that; and thinking she would put up an opposition performance and see how *he* liked it, carried it too far (as young people are apt to do when they get excited) and found herself really drowned.

Has anyone, by the way, ever worked out whether Ophelia and *The Lady of Shalott* could have been suggested by the same story of the same girl? If so, though quite clear that Ophelia met

her end *by* water as well as *on* the water, is it specifically stated what the Shalott girl died of?

From the bank and from the river

He flashed into the crystal mirror,

"Tirra lirra," by the river

Sang Sir Lancelot.

She left the web, she left the loom,

She made three paces thro' the room—

That was after the mirror was cracked by no human agency . . . and she laid herself down on the barge, arranged her white draperies. The scene shifts to Camelot, where somebody rushed to Lancelot and said: "There's a dead dame on yon barge," and Lancelot muttered: "Yes, and by Jove, a good-looker too!" ("He mused, she has a lovely face.") And thus a somewhat sketchy love-affair came to an end.

Our only clue is "Singing in her song she died," apparently loud enough to startle the reapers in among the bearded barley, and anyone else who happened to hear her. Tennyson also relates that she was glassy-eyed, which points to a sort of hypnotic trance. One would like to have been told what she sang? I believe it was one of those "Here's me" recitatives that go on and on: "Here's me, under a curse; cracked my looking-glass; had my bellyful of needle-work; here's me, who never did like boating, and not even knowing he'll be glad to see me when I arrive. Here's me, haven't had a bite to eat since I left Shalott—was it yesterday morning?—no, yesterday was Thursday. Wish I'd brought a wrap of some sort. Here's me, feeling *awful* and nobody cares . . ."

Unexplained behaviourism. Ballads are usually meticulously logical; emotion passes into action swiftly, and the ballad-monger takes you from fact to fact without any misty spaces between. *The Lady of Shalott* is inspired by this sharp, clear-hued pre-Raphaelite tradition in scenery:

Willows whiten, aspens quiver,

Little breezes dusk and shiver

Thro' the wave that runs for ever. . . .

But what was the story? And who laid a curse on her? And how did it function? And under what compulsion did she drift downstream on a boat, singing and dying? The mirror suggests a symbolical reason: the eternal division between dreams and reality. She had been put under one of those prohibitions, and like Eve, like Psyche, like Elsa von Brabant, was not an obedient girl. . . . "I am half sick of shadows," said the Lady of Shalott." So she tried to violate reality itself, and somehow was not allowed; it went against the curse; she could not take it. She should have remained where she was, weaving and dreaming and content with the sweet lure of human life where it passed behind her, so that she only saw it reversed and unsubstantial, a looking-glass world.

Tennyson never told us she got out of the barge and went into the river and stayed in just long enough to lose consciousness, and then climbed back again onto the barge and made sure it was going in the right direction where Sir Lancelot would see her, after she had died of exposure. Easy enough to make fun of folklore and fable and legend, but this particular example always struck me as more than arbitrary.

Shakespeare, on the other hand, clearly defined Ophelia's death by drowning. Eye-witness account. Laertes and then Hamlet actually leapt into her grave. A friend told me (not as though they had any bearing on *Hamlet*) of her own two matter-of-fact old uncles, a colonel and a major in the orthodox military tradition, who strongly disapproved of the local doctor for jumping into his wife's grave at her funeral: "That sort of fellah, he'll be married again within a year." "And was he?" I asked eagerly, for it was the sort of incident which could not be left unfinished; though when she replied gaily: "Yes, my dear, he was," I doubted her veracity. She had a most interesting family and enjoyed them all in the right spirit: her maternal grandfather had eleven children by his first wife, quarrelled with all of them when they grew up, and swore he would start a second family by another wife and call them one by one by the same Christian names, to see if



they turned out any better. But after the first two, the sexes did not fit any more. This is obviously a story without an ending.

But whether in truth she lost her wits or not, I always feel inclined to wince when Ophelia is played by ambitious actresses as though all Hanwell could not hold her; stark, staring, raving, ranting mad, all-over-the-stage mad, eyeballs rolling, hands frantically clutching at the empty space. Poor child, she had not all that material to be mad with! Before her mind went straying, she was simple and very sweet and affectionate and a little bit silly; afterwards she would surely have still remained simple and very sweet and affectionate and a little silly; the pieces, as in a jig-saw picture, could have come apart, and shaken up loosely without coherence or meaning, but they would have been the same pieces:

"Thought and affliction, passion, hell itself,  
She turns to favour and to prettiness."

Ophelia had not been transformed by some peculiar witchcraft to a Siddons, Rachel, Duse, Bernhardt and Mrs. Patrick Campbell (how awkward, the "Mrs." attached after death, but if we began to say "Stella Campbell," it would be suggesting a stranger for immortality).

It is, I hope, a harmless pastime, though one is no Shakesperian scholar, yet to pick up and play about with a few minor theories on a line here, a character there; tiny pebbles on a great beach where trespassers need not be prosecuted. At the age of seven I was allowed to play the corpse of Imogen in a school performance of *Cymbeline*, and lay supine, thrilled by my own importance while Guiderius and Arviragus declaimed over my body; even then and ever since, I have felt that Shakespeare's most perfect threnody, "Fear no more the heat of the sun," must have been suggested to the two youths by the sight of Imogen, young and comely in her boy's disguise. Certainly Arviragus said:

"And let us, Polydore, though now our voices  
Have got the mannish crack, sing him to the ground,  
As once our mother; use like note and words,  
Save that Euriphile must be Fidele."

But they were *not* "note and words" that any sons, however loving, would have used to sing their mother to the ground. Re-read the words of that heart-broken lyric, and see if they could have been originally addressed to a middle-aged or elderly woman:

"Fear no more the heat o' the sun,  
Nor the furious winter's rages;  
Thou thy worldly task hast done,  
Home art gone, and ta'en thy wages:  
Golden lads and girls all must,  
As chimney-sweepers, come to dust.

"Fear no more the lightning-flash,  
Nor the all-dreaded thunder-stone;  
Fear not slander, censure rash;  
Thou hast finish'd joy and moan:  
All lovers young, all lovers must  
Consign to thee, and come to dust."

"Euriphile, our mother" in such context is simply nonsense. Nor is it easy to understand why Shakespeare, pouring out these glorious verses of youth mourning for the death of youth, should for once have bothered to account for them, or say to himself: "It isn't *likely* that two boys would improvise such poetry, so I'd better mention they'd done it before, over their mother." He was never so precise and meticulous as to account for inspiration in any of his other plays.

But how carelessly the man throws wisdom as well as beauty over his shoulder! So that one's eye, glancing down the same column, can light on such a gem as this, uttered at a moment of no importance, by someone of no importance, concerning another character of no importance: "Thersites' body is as good as Ajax', When neither are alive." Did he ever stop to say to himself delightedly: "Boy, you've spoken a mouthful"?

No, from a profusion of such riches as the world has never known before or after, lines like these just fell uncounted through a hole in his pocket and were not missed.

As we have discovered that debunking, or to use a more elegant term, deflation, is the essential purpose and delight of revue, it is

a pity that our greatest living Lord High Debunker has never turned his hand to that special idiom in the theatre. Not that it is too late; the boy is, after all, only in his nineties.

Safety First is a rule of the pavement, and so is Don't Run into Danger Unnecessarily. I am aware with that sense of trepidation which is half pleasure, that I am abandoning safety if I step off the pavement for even a few moments; it is never safe to confess we love or hate a play written by G. B. S. Better pretend to a weary indifference. As though I *could* be indifferent to *Heartbreak House*. Of all Shaw's plays, I love it best. I said "love." There are others at which I am, so to speak, tickled to death, and some where I exult at what Rebecca West calls his "panache":

There is a pride in his mental movements that reminds one of the bull-ring, of the walk of the matador into the centre of the arena when he is going to fight the bull to the finish. That walk has panache. It has pride: not only individual pride, which is a little thing, and not impressive, since the individual can boast of nothing that will not die with its short life, but the pride of a species, which has reason to suppose that if it justified that pride by splendid performance it may live as long as the earth.

Other of his works, again, fill me with profound respect for an achievement of real stature and greatness. But love—love is a different matter, and one's reasons for loving are usually not reasons at all. *Heartbreak House* is, I am told, an eccentric choice. (*Androcles and the Lion* is my next favourite.) The nearest approach to the mood of *Heartbreak House* that I can recall is Evelyn Waugh's *A Handful of Dust*; Saki now and then achieved the same mood of tragic clowning; and Scott Fitzgerald, in a novel called *Tender Is the Night*.

As far as I am concerned, Shaw pulled it off when he scooped up The Heartbreak House group, all at sixes and sevens; yet they could still be worth while, worth the pain. (The French phrase is better: *Ça vaud la peine*.) For the whole play is wrenched and broken with real pain that has not even the justification of grandeur and sacrifice; foolish, futile pain of human beings hurting

each other, flippant at the wrong moment, desperately lonely, though talking all the time; till their creator, for once calling a halt in mockery, let compassion take charge; aware in his wisdom that only a simple crisis like war (war is simple at the moment of its outbreak; complications have all been before, and start a bit later, and the worst complications when it is all over) may unite them into some simple foolish manifestation like patriotism and the exultant joy of imminent danger and death; blow them from their endless wrangling or their little scooped-out caves and hollows of isolation:

*Mrs. Hushabye:* Who was that running away? Did you hear the explosions? And the sound in the sky: it's splendid: it's like an orchestra: it's like Beethoven.

*Ellie:* By thunder, Hesione: it is Beethoven.

*(She and Hesione throw themselves into one another's arms in wild excitement. The light increases.)*

*Mazzini:* I hope poor Mangan is safe.

*Mrs. Hushabye:* He is hiding in the cave in the gravel pit.

*Captain Shotover:* My dynamite threw him there. It is the hand of God.

*Hector:* There is not half light enough. We should be blazing to the skies.

*Ellie (tense with excitement):* Set fire to the house, Marcus.

*Mrs. Hushabye:* My house! No.

*Hector:* I thought of that; but it would not be ready in time.

*Captain Shotover:* The judgment has come. Courage will not save you; but it will shew that your souls are still alive.

*Mrs. Hushabye:* Oh! they have passed us.

*Lady Utterword:* The danger is over, Randall. Go to bed.

*Captain Shotover:* Turn in, all hands. The ship is safe.

*(He sits down and goes to sleep.)*

*Ellie (disappointedly):* Safe!

*Hector (disgustedly):* Yes, safe. And how damnably dull the world has become again suddenly! *(He sits down.)*

Whenever *Heartbreak House* is put on, I go to see it in the hope that at last the producer will have found a young actress to play Ellie as she appeared to me when I first read the play. Captain Shotover has been realised, a figure out of Blake made

vulnerable and uninhibited. Far too uninhibited, his daughters might have said; though of kindlier nature than Goneril and Regan, they did not go quite so far towards silencing him, but contented themselves with the weary equivalent of a Cockney's "Oh, give over, Pa, *dol!*" But then Captain Shotover had mysterious access to wisdom and truth, despite his formidable lack of suavity and conventional good manners, whereas Lear, as he came to see too late for his own good, was a very foolish fond old man. Cedric Hardwicke brought me Captain Shotover, and Edith Evans both Lady Utterword and, in a much later production, Mrs. Hushabye. And in my dream casting I should keep Léon Quartermaine young enough to repeat his Hector Hushabye and—was it Wilfred Lawson whom I once saw as a superb Mangan? But Ellie should be a young actress, aged eighteen, called Celia Johnson; and what are we to do about that? Perhaps it is as well that I cannot have my heart broken by these actors in *Heartbreak House*; already the play approximates too nearly to our own futile lives, our own muddles, our own illogical foolishness . . . mixed all the time, as Shaw knew only too well how to mix it, with the longing that somehow, in some way, through somebody else or through ourselves, we might suddenly be made "different."

The most recent production of *Heartbreak House* was early in 1943; and a very peculiar effect in irony and chance occurred night after night during Act III, which (you may remember) showed us a little baby air-raid in the war of 1914-1918, that war which had so many more casualties in the trenches than in the war which we have not quite learnt to call the Last War (but are still saying This War), yet could not compete over air-raids. So we could hardly refrain from slight hysteria when from the wings they did "noises off" to indicate a Zeppelin: it was like our little boy running round and round the garden saying "Choo-choo-choo, I'm a puff-puff," while at the same time more convincing noises off indicated that this was twenty years later, and—oh, ye falling heavens—we had made Progress.

Nevertheless, to a dramatist who knows his job, the reactions

of human nature remain exactly the same; and that is where Mr. Bernard Shaw annihilates our faintly hysterical desire to giggle at his little baby air-raid. The response of his characters in the Last War raids tallied with their response to the tremendous multiplication of noise, peril and catastrophe in which we have been more recently engaged. Panic does not alter, nor heroism, nor exhilaration.

I was thinking of Act III of *Heartbreak House* when during the week after D-day, I happened to be looking at St. James's Church in Piccadilly. Still shattered from the bombs that hit it in October, 1940, exposed from all sides, windows, doors, and roof, Sir Christopher Wren might have smiled tenderly at the defiant and somewhat superfluous notice at the gate, stating in conventional terms: "This church will be *open* for special prayer. . . ." A huge tree in full leaf on one side competed with an enormous poster of Yardley's Lavender on the other. Nor did Yardley's Lavender girls seem any more out of place than the trees, if they were to help pay for the reconstruction. This was before Queen Mary's Flower Garden was to offer us its coloured patch of thanksgiving.

Lavender and London Pride! Still, I suppose if one is feeling sentimental, one can find this sort of inexpensive analogy anywhere. Moving away only a few hundred yards to Vigo Street, I had a sharper encounter with irony again; for there was a gap on the second and third floor of the building above the Bodley Head where two sets of chambers belonging to Albany had been burnt out by an incendiary bomb. And going a few steps in the direction of Bond Street, the entrance to the Burlington Arcade, and opposite in Savile Row, and Conduit Street and Burton Street within hardly more than two hundred yards' radius, all showed what could be done in one night to reduce a dignified prosperity to the sort of picturesque ruins we have grown to associate with the payment of sixpence and the drone of a guide. The irony you can see for yourself in a quotation from a Christmas card I received I forget when, perhaps just before the war, from the bookshop which had succeeded the Bodley Head on those premises:

. . . the book-room of Bertram Rota, who makes a special point of authors of the last fifty or sixty years. It is dressed with portraits of the older authors and signed photographs of the living; and the stock harmonizes with the premises. They are in a dignified quarter of the town. Savile Row faces them. Burlington Arcade is a few yards beyond them. They are in Vigo Street, at the point where Albany emerges; and what makes them so fit to their contents is that they are the old premises of John Lane, where he set up as a publisher at the sign of the Bodley Head. Thus, you can browse among books of the recent past in rooms peopled by the ghosts of their authors, who were so often there in the body—Beardsley, Davidson, Stephen Phillips, William Watson, Lionel Johnson, Henry Harland and Wilde. Some of them, if I may believe the tale of my seniors, went there with the purpose of caressing John Lane's throat. *But all is peace today. No rumour or wisp of rumour of those quarrels moves across the quiet air of Bodley House.*

The truth is that the best selections of irony are born, not made. If we think them up and sew them together, they will always carry a doubt of their validity. But "This church will be open" and "all is peace today" are Al-Copper-bottom-at-Lloyd's examples. (My younger generation of London readers, if any, will not understand this particular metaphor any more than they connect the Eagle in the City Road with the disconcerting way the money goes . . . and is gone.)

War or no war, bombs or no bombs, every good play is a topical play. Let us begin in Time the Past, say the Edwardian period, and imagine ourselves looking at the auditorium of a London West End theatre during the entr'acte. The audience, arriving nearly two hours later than now, will not be hungry, for they have amply dined; they will not be over-tired, for most of them have travelled in comfort, if not by car or taxi, then at least *sitting* in omnibuses that ran frequently through the well-lighted streets. No, they need not have sacrificed anything to be here at the theatre during the first decade of the twentieth century; entertainment then was so easy and safe; "safe" would once have seemed a curious word to use in connection with an evening at

His Majesty's or the Haymarket or the New. Letting our eyes rove up and down over different parts of the house would have given us few surprises, for the audience would be automatically sifted into their accepted social strata: in the stalls and boxes, the ladies in full regalia of evening-dress and long white kid gloves (sixteen buttons), the gentlemen in tails or dinner-jacket, no impedimenta except for the gibus which could pop open or shut flat like a jack-in-the-box. A sort of superficial flash and glitter often concealed boredom and rarely concealed bad manners: the first act was really much too long. . . . No use staying right until the end, "God Save the King" and all that fuss. . . . We can push past . . . must stop (holding up the whole row) and talk to dear Lady Y! The dress circle also would be well-fed and well-dressed in "semi-evening"; moderately well-to-do, and well-pleased with themselves for having chosen a fairly "serious" play. The upper circle, largely from the suburbs, would be in their day clothes, and perhaps rather envious of the stalls and dress circle, more hopeful that the second act would contain some really funny jokes to take them out of themselves, a trifle more harassed about how to get home afterwards. In the gallery and pit we should have seen the working classes, rowdy and convivial and certainly more keenly alert than the rest, shouting pertinent criticism, eating nuts and oranges and chocolates with relish, scoffing at the wealthy and idle in the wealthy and idle parts of the theatre. . . .

Time: the remote Past.

Time: the near Past. A vast occupation of faces curving up in a giant shell from stalls to gallery, with no marked division anywhere between rich or poor, young or old, friend or stranger, civilian or the Services, elegant or shabby, English or foreign, the working or the leisured classes—for indeed, the leisured classes have ceased to exist. Poverty-stricken colonels in the gallery and affluent privates in the stalls . . . The auditorium of a London West End theatre after five years of war might be painted as a tremendous symbolic picture signifying the End of the Snob Age.



Every second man or girl wears some battered uniform; they dump haversack and tin hat under the seat. Civilians have long ago ceased to worry over their shabbiness, because the theatre is no longer a social function, but a place to see a play; which is why they so unconcernedly carry their bundles, attaché cases and string bags that bulge with the weekly rations brazen without paper wrapping. It is too early for many of them to have had an evening meal; but they do not care, they bring spam sandwiches and munch them when they can, or gladly wait until afterwards. Most of them have come straight from work, struggling through the black-out, grateful for the clearer dusk as the spring advances. No question of who cannot "afford" a taxi or private car; omnibuses are crammed; tubes are crammed; yet some way, somehow, by the courtesy of their own genuine eagerness, which can respect the eagerness of others, hardly anyone is late for the rise of the curtain. A strange understanding almost visibly passes from mind to mind, that for all of them this is worth while; worth while to be here, though grimy and tired and hungry and on the outside edge of safety; worth the obstacle race; worth patiently standing in queues to squeeze in at last. Call it winter still and say it is pitch dark outside and that at any moment the sirens may wail and swell and the bombs crash out of nowhere . . . but meanwhile here is escape, for here is the play! Shakespeare's *Richard III*, with the Old Vic company at the New Theatre, Laurence Olivier in the name-part.

It was purely fortuitous that Laurence Olivier's film of *Henry V* should have had the high light upon it concurrently with his performance as Richard III; thus, so to speak, scoring an astonishing double first in Shakespeare. An amusing item of his biography reveals that his first appearance on any stage was at Stratford-on-Avon in 1922, when at the age of fifteen he played Katharina in *The Taming of the Shrew* for a boys' performance at the Festival Theatre.

When war broke out, Olivier did not return at once to England, for the cunning reason that he was determined to do his share,

and knew himself too old to be taught flying in this country, so it were better to learn the job in America. Then he came back and (like Ralph Richardson) entered the Fleet Air Arm. In 1942 the Ministry of Information asked the Admiralty if they would release him to do two propaganda films, of which *Henry V* was the second. Lieutenant Olivier himself ruefully relates of the unflattering ease with which he was released from his "indispensable" duties in the Air Arm.

The next time that London saw him in the flesh, after several years, was when the Old Vic company in its new formation opened on August 31, 1944, with *Peer Gynt*. Richardson played the name-part and Olivier appeared for barely five minutes as the Moulder of Buttons. Their acquiescence in a policy that put the play before the team was worth all perilous star-shine.

A fortnight later, Olivier appeared as Richard III.

Most of us have an instinct slightly transcending logical criticism, by which we fix our eyes on this or that young aspirant and say to ourselves: "I believe he's got it in him." (This is obviously no place to start defining "it.") After that initial discovery in the spot-the-winner game, we usually have to wait a long time before we can declare "I told you so!" with a triumphant glare at such friends who forget or pretend to forget that we did tell them so. "For if it be a sin to covet honour"—but to win honour the aspirant must plod up the ladder, rung by rung. The rung-by-rung platitude, in the case of Sir Laurence Olivier, was fairly unsensational until he was about half-way up. Solid and not flimsy in intent, he was often good in a part; sometimes exceptionally good; equally often we agreed that the part did not suit him, or that he was excellent in the first or second act but went to pieces in the third. . . . At one period, as often happens in a stage career, he stuck in a groove, always cast for the type of dark and angry young man, rather hysterical and undisciplined, whom we met a lot at the sort of parties where we left early; it was clear that this sequence had to be broken or he would be playing the same angry young man when he was sixty; I forget how he broke

it, but anyhow, before and after his Stanhope in the first performance of *Journey's End* and a sudden surprising foretaste of his range and broadly comic quality when he hiccupped his way through Sir Toby Belch, nothing very marked drew our attention: he was an interesting actor, an attractive actor, an admirably experimental actor, and . . . there were signs and flashes.

He vanished to Hollywood. His reappearance on the stage in the fifth year of war was a dramatic leap to the top of the ladder without visible need of the intervening rungs. Here was fine acting, authority, a mature control of his medium which enabled him to build a character by imperceptible degrees till mentally, morally, and even physically it progressed to a three-dimensional whole. "Have you seen him as Richard III?" his somewhat dazed well-wishers were asking, hardly aware of what had happened to him, or how or when. "You *must* see him as Richard III!"

When carried away from the reality of real life into the different realities of Shakespeare, I get seized by the childish desire to shout warning to those on the stage; Desdemona (for instance) not "to keep on so" about Michael Cassio; "Can't you *see*, you little ass, how you're making Othello worse and worse!" To Cordelia, or to Lear, advising the former to give in, sisters or no sisters, to her Dad's unreasonable desire to be assured of her love in more than florid terms; and to Lear—there is no end to the things we might prophesy to Lear in the first act, beginning with: "Hang on to your crown, you crazy old fool, and *don't* divide up your kingdom!" Nor can I be alone in my continual impulse, whenever Duncan arrives at the Macbeths' country seat, to prompt him wildly to say that he is *so* sorry he cannot possibly stay the night; lunch, yes, delighted! the night, no! In the production in which Olivier played Macbeth, Duncan was put into a room over the garage with a rickety outside staircase, and, no doubt, conveniences of the most rustic type. Surely he must have wondered whether this was the Macbeths' only spare bedroom? Surely when his hostess left him there—"Now, mind you call if you haven't got everything you want"—surely he must have

formed some faint suspicion? And Olivier's Crookback is so evil and malignant beneath the surface, so suave and plausible in speech and dealing, that I can barely restrain myself from begging Clarence on his way to the Tower to be less trustful of this smooth affectionate brother; or to tell the younger of the two little Princes, please, please not to romp with *that* uncle; not with that one, however genial! For *Richard III*, in spite of its warlike ending, seemed in this Old Vic production essentially a family play; by which I do not mean that it is a play hearty and agreeable and fit for the kiddies; but a fascinating saga of murder accumulating on the soul of a man who finds it humorous as well as expedient to dispose of his relations, since his deformity has cheated him of other and more straightforward delights. This Gloucester's mock-humble refusal and the reluctant acceptance of the crown of England was blood-curdling:

"Alas! why would you heap this care on me?  
I am unfit for state and majesty."

His mien, his subtle inflections, as though the border-line between himself and sainthood were but the breadth of a hair, his final look when at last he was persuaded to accept the crown. . . . Can this same actor have looked to us as noble Harry looked?

The sword with which Richard desperately tried to defend his life at the end of the play was the identical weapon carried by Kean, and after him by Irving, when they played the part. John Gielgud was bequeathed it by his great-aunt Ellen Terry, and gave it to his fellow-actor as a graceful tribute to a third great Richard III.

It is pleasant to reflect that Emma Cons, who started The Old Vic, might have been granted one prophetic dream: of her players in the summer of 1945, after performing for nearly a year to packed houses in a large West End theatre, having the crowning honour—never before extended to any foreign company—of an invitation to a season as guests of the Comédie Française; ambassadors to a city which in Time the Past has

been first to realise that acting as much as any other of the arts deserves formal as well as spontaneous recognition.

For in the sixth year of war, we came into our heritage and Shakespeare into his kingdom.

No one who has been in a London theatre during those years, could fail to be moved by the spectacle of an international congregation spellbound and responsive as when an especially powerful preacher holds his hearers with a message at once familiar and yet new. Nor can we doubt that this quickened feeling, mysterious as all periods of renaissance must be mysterious in origin, was utterly sincere; for heavens alive—and they often were, between six-fifteen and eight-forty-five—was it a time for us to kill our strictly rationed time by only faking enjoyment of this highbrow bid for our attention? Only pretending that Shakespeare could satisfy us when we were battered and weary and—the natural word to follow is “disillusioned,” and I had nearly written it, but not quite, for in the omission lies the crux of the whole thing.

Perhaps not so mysterious in origin, after all. I have an idea that our need for Shakespeare to re-freshen us (and refresh is a word to be taken slowly and literally) began round and about the unforgotten summer of 1940; began with the little ships that went to the rescue of our defeated armies at Dunkirk. It is no anti-climax to believe that onward from there, through the Battle of Britain, the defence of Malta, the embarkation from England to France on D day, and our sorrow and pride over Arnhem, a living Shakespeare found his living audience.

The English-speaking nations have become aware of him because he was aware of them, their nature and capacity; and carelessly, out of his abundance, hit on the rich and vital words to express the feeling of free men against tyranny; the feeling of a lost cause without shame because not shamefully lost; of strength redeemed from chaos; of the exultation of the few against the many:

"We few, We happy few, we band of brothers;  
For he to-day that sheds his blood with me  
Shall be my brother."

Who can call Shakespeare dry and out-of-date when these lines from *Henry V* were printed on the grateful card sent to the donors of the Army Blood Transfusion Service? He is for ever articulate, and topical as the green unscabbarded spring:

"Now is the winter of our discontent  
Made glorious summer by this sun of York."

"Now all the youth of England are on fire,  
And silken dalliance in the wardrobe lies."

Now and now and now, such speeches can be heard in theatre and cinema, our very leaders quoted them without false embarrassment, and Montgomery on the eve of D day used the same words, tense and true and simple, that Oliver Cromwell borrowed before Marston Moor, and Richmond spoke in his prayer before Bosworth:

"O Thou, whose captain I account myself,  
Look on my forces with a gracious eye;  
Put in their hands thy bruising irons of wrath,  
That they may crush down with a heavy fall  
The usurping helmets of our adversaries!  
Make us thy ministers of chastisement,  
That we may praise thee in thy victory!"

Theatre *and* cinema. This, you see, is where the joke comes in. We know about the Elizabethan drama at the Globe, the strolling players striving to please their noble, nonchalant patrons, the coarser public from the London taverns throwing lewd jests and orange-peel on to the apron stage, the placards held up momentarily in place of scenery: "A Tavern in Eastcheap" or "An Antechamber in the King's Palace." But the twentieth century brings us opportunity for a queer transformation scene when we can sit in a modern luxury cinema and watch in Laurence

Olivier's production of *Henry V* how the play was actually done in its confinement to the wooden O . . . till the world of sixteenth century makeshift strangely widened and spread and carried us to Southampton and the little ships with their troops and equipment crossing to the shores of France, and we hardly knew any more what was yesterday and what our no less adventurous to-day.

Nothing is new under the visiting sun. Is Agincourt in truth so near to Alamein, for the tense moment when the watching king suddenly gave the signal to his archers—the very signal that Monty's officers gave for his artillery to start their devastating barrage? The little ships on the Channel in sight of France; the snipers hidden in trees, invisible in their green camouflage till the swift instant of entry; the "tank traps" set up to protect our archers and impale the heavy cavalry, equivalent of a modern armoured division thundering down the slope; sequence of pictures of the French country-side after war had poured over it and left it devastated, the enemy disregard of the rules of warfare when they galloped into the tents and set fire to the baggage, killing the boys left to guard it. "Kill the poys and the luggagel" exclaimed Fluellen, shocked, "'Tis expressly against the law of arms." And then King Henry in white-hot fury, the more deadly for its outward control: "I was not angry since I came to France until this instant."

Analogy flows on: it was surely a typical British Tommy of this war sitting at the camp-fire on the night before Agincourt, who argued with touching simplicity and with that characteristic under-rating of his own courage (since the moment had not yet arrived to display it), of how the common man dies in battle.

In saying that *Henry V* was an exceptional film, it would be only fair to start from the premise that all films conceived in England then and carried through to a successful conclusion must be exceptional, considering the steady optimism and endurance needed to sustain any achievement that had to continue even for a week. And from first to last this production took nearly eighteen

months. Yet the finished product bore no bruises, and we can only guess what the difficulties and disappointments must have been. All the scenes of Agincourt were shot in Eire—(there is a quaintness about this)—and the French cavalry were professional Irish Jocks. The stylised backgrounds, a bit flat and heraldic and out of perspective, that somehow gave the right effect of the fourteenth century as we have always imagined it, were indeed adapted from the miniature illustrations in the Duc de Berry's manuscripts of that period. William Walton contributed incidental music to cause a stir in the blood. And in the acting we noticed a new element which is best described by repeating the word "actors" and not preceding it with the word film and a hyphen. For the producer-director, an actor himself, decided to gather his principals together in a room and rehearse them for the first three weeks in the usual way, as though for a stage play, before going on to the set. This is what gave the rare impression, in the film of *Henry V*, that the characters had met before.

Laurence Olivier produced and directed *Henry V*, and himself played the king; a magnificent performance which one remembers as a whole and also for isolated moments that only detach themselves and spring vividly to the mind long after it was all over and one had gone home. For it is true in this instance that after one had gone home it was not all over, and we still heard the cold biting courtesy of King Henry's voice acknowledging the Dauphin's gift which mocked his youth; or see his face watching from high vantage for the exact moment to give the signal to release the whirr of English arrows to stop the ominous French charge at Agincourt: face and eyes never moved, but you said to yourself, "God, what a responsibility!"—summing up all command in all wars. And again, on the night before the fight, when disguised in a soldier's cloak he sat awhile alone by the flare of the camp-fire, *thinking* of the idleness in ceremony, the words quietly spoken on the sound-track, an invisible accompaniment to the changing thoughts that occasionally crossed his face and shadowed his eyes; yet only occasionally; and by this



same discipline of underplaying, we were barely allowed to catch the cynicism that flickered swift as lightning over the exquisite love-scenes with his French Flower-de-Luce:

*K. Hen.* Wilt thou have me?

*Kath.* Dat is as it sall please de roi mon père.

*K. Hen.* Nay, it will please him well, Kate; it *shall* please him, Kate.

Understatement, a most admirable trait in film stars and film producers, one instance among many, appeared at the finale of the almost too well-known speech before Harfleur: "Once more unto the breach, dear friends, once more," which ends on the line: "Cry 'God for Harry, England, and Saint George!'" Before "St. George" had been flung from his mouth, the great white charger beneath him reared violently and galloped off into the attack, with eloquence unfinished. A delightful sequel (legend or truth?) happened almost every day in the quiet streets of the village where Lady Olivier did her daily shopping, and to save petrol, drove a horse and trap. The horse was a domestic favourite, sweet-natured and obedient, but apparently had one fault, a habit of standing stock-still in the middle of the street and refusing all blandishments to go on. Then, to the surprise of the passers-by, Vivien Leigh cried as a last resource: "God for Harry, England, *and St. George*"—to which the royal white charger immediately responded and broke into a gallop.

I was glad Laurence Olivier had conceived the bold idea of starting *Henry V* by the camera trucking over a wooden London looking very small and defenceless, surrounded by green fields; thence to the rumbustious atmosphere of the Old Globe behind the scenes; girls played by boys; swaggering gallants pushing their way in; tankards of ale for the Archbishop. But after the Chorus gradually receded in voice and person, the mist swirled round, and by the wizardry of 1944 the scene widened to Southampton and the embarkation for France; I was well content, and had no desire that at the very end of the film infinite possibility should dwindle and shrink and be packed away into its finite

box. On this arbitrary return to the Bankside Globe, as it were using modern invention to snub modern invention, I had a stimulating argument with Sir Laurence, who announced, as we all do in the same circumstances (vulnerable where our child is attacked), that my sole criticism referred to his *favourite* bit of the whole production. When I pressed him to say why, he gave an excellent reason which nevertheless left me unconvinced, because I think it sprang from a professional actor's innate pride in tradition. (Alfred Lunt and Lynn Fontanne confirmed this by wholeheartedly agreeing with him, not with me.) He said he liked to think that just that poor handful of players, hampered by their wretched equipment and restricted to those narrow boards, could yet by their art alone take captive their audiences' imaginations, so that they should have seen and heard all we had been seeing and hearing of "the swelling scene . . . the vasty fields of France."

Yet did they? Could they? Never did lines more clearly indicate that just what Shakespeare longed for in performances of this play was the cinema medium. Hear him cry aloud for it:

"Grapple your minds to sternage of this navy"—

"Work, work your thoughts"—

"Piece out our imperfections with your thoughts;  
 Into a thousand parts divide one man,  
 And make imaginary puissance;  
 Think, when we talk of horses, that you see them  
 Printing their proud hoofs i' the receiving earth."

Thus admitting, via Chorus, that he honestly did not see how otherwise he was to conjure our vision of the "very casques that did affright the air at Agincourt." Clearly he longed for what waited to be invented, not as substitute but (as here used) to *aid* the player and producer. Which absolves no one from exertion, dims no credit, nor (as some severe young disciplinarians say) encourages undue indolence in a present-day audience who, suffering perpetual strain and supertax on their energy, merit well

a compassionate means to transport them by the swiftness of light to the very place the dramatist would have them, rather than bid them trudge the distance. I argued with Olivier (neither, of course, as coherent then as here in my after-polishings) that for all his vicarious pride in the Globe players, he could not *know* that with only their poor equipment they *had* achieved all this for an Elizabethan audience, as he in his film had achieved it for a twentieth century audience.

No theatrical production could ever have created that most thrilling of all moments in the film, when the old cramped medium of Shakespeare's day, helped out by Chorus and his wishful thinking, opened out into the newer medium of infinite possibility. . . . When imagination, freed from further need to collaborate, could surrender wholly and lie relaxed, letting Time the Present do it all.

## CHAPTER VI "Unarm, Eros"

And Time the Present, which is wherever in arbitrary mood we place ourselves at a point between the past and the future and call it "now," Time the Present gave me a delightful contribution to add to London Pride—a picture of the winged god, the archer, the Shaftesbury Memorial, Eros (a newspaper correspondence on the subject lasted several weeks)—Eros, to choose his most familiar name, safely restored to his plinth in Piccadilly Circus after his long war absence, and round him a ring of American Whitecaps grinning broadly, sitting there raised well above the traffic and the crowds, tickled to death at their inclusion in the tableau. And on the next level were the maidens, the flappers, the bobby-sox girls, ignoring Eros, lifting their adoration to the American sailors. And grouped round the base of the memorial, those tough old warriors, the flower women, also grinning broadly, delighted to be home again. It was by the happiest chance that the restoration of Eros at the hub of London coincided with the week when the United States fleet was in. Whenever I happened to pass, there they were, Whitecaps in a ring, just contentedly sitting; I should have said the same Whitecaps, but perhaps the coveted circle of accommodation changed every hour. To the indiscriminating eye the tableau continued to represent with a grace and felicity that could only have been achieved by sheer accident, a symbolic group of the return of peace and the Anglo-American alliance.

Other signs had not been lacking, of course, that war was over, and such minor rigours of war as we had begun to take for granted. It was some time, for instance, before I could realise that there was no need to cumber my evening bag with a torch

when I went to the theatre. Perhaps it *was* faintly silly to step out into Shaftesbury Avenue or the Haymarket or the Strand, slanting a careful ray of light before me into a clearly lit street where every car, every omnibus, every lamp-post, every theatre façade combined to make my wistful little torch superfluous . . . until at last I pulled myself together and decided to be venture-some, leave my torch at home, and be no longer derided by my friends.

And then one day I glanced into a toy-shop window and saw joyfully that the Diver had come back. No child born during the war years could have known, as I did, the thrill of a diver in one's bath unless they happened to have inherited one. Some of you will probably remember how you blew down a long flexible rubber tube to which the little man was attached in his goggles and helmet, and he slowly rose to the surface of the water in a circle of bubbles. That evening I left a small boy of six exuberant, the bathroom flooded, and his indulgent parents in a state of complete helplessness, wishing, no doubt, that I had never been born to complicate bed-time with Toys that had Come Back Again.

And from the foyer of my favourite restaurant, below street-level, where we used to sit at little tables and drink cocktails, but which had been turned into a most efficient air-raid shelter, the posts and planks were removed swiftly as a dream, and lol (hel-lol!) it was a foyer again with a bar and little tables where visitors from abroad sat and told Baron Munchausen stories to those who had not yet been able to get abroad to verify them. So the temptation was irresistible to let the stories escape control and grow tall and taller. . . . In fact 1946 was the Munchausen period: "My dear, the Place Vendôme is *flat!*"—and so forth.

Then I fetched home the suitcase containing odd garments and other "vital necessities" that we had all been asked to deposit with a friend in another part of London, and was amazed to find the optimism with which one had sent away what might

prove to be the only survivors of one's wardrobe: a collection of garments of which in pre-war days one would have said: "My dear, I wouldn't be seen dead in a ditch wearing these!" Among the toilet articles, toothbrush, comb, soap, and so forth, I had thrust (no doubt at the last moment, and for what motive I shall never guess) a jar of pomade such as old-fashioned Nannies swear by in the nursery, but which I had certainly never used in peace or war, so why should it thus suddenly have been promoted a "vital necessity"? I must have said to myself in one of those bogus moments of Firm Efficiency which occur at a crisis: "I might be glad of this," and so in went the pomade, and out it came to join that collection of odd items, incongruous and absurd, that announced more convincingly than any headlines that the special urgencies of war were over.

The thick apricot curtains on the staircase could return to being a bedspread. I did not have to have two copies typed of my manuscript to send to America by different ships at different times, in case one was sunk. We had an official weather forecast every day. An up-to-date volume of the London Telephone Directory was delivered at the door on May 29th, 1945.

A young war wife, while staying with me, received a warm cable of personal congratulations for her talent and resource in finishing the war, from her husband in China; who then added on a muted note, drawing the blinds down on hilarity—"and my renewed deep sympathy to your Mother in her sore bereavement." Her mother's second husband had been killed in an air-raid, but it was a pity perhaps that the cable should have arrived on her third wedding-day.

And in May, 1945, Mrs. Churchill, just back from Russia, was greeted on the airfield by the Soviet Ambassador, and the paragraph (with picture) added: "The Prime Minister was also at the airfield." It was very pleasant to see Winston Churchill figuring as an "also." I thought of the reports of him struggling like mad with his entourage on D day, having to be forcibly restrained, hitting out a right and left with his doubled fists . . .

because he wanted to go too and they would not let him. I thought of his earlier desperate visit to France at the eleventh hour in June, 1940, to confer with Reynaud . . . when it did not seem like melodrama that he should have taken a revolver in his pocket. And I thought of the letter published in the *Spectator* and addressed to his ancestor, the Duke of Marlborough:

Glory established upon the uninterrupted success of honourable Designs and Actions is not subject to Diminution; nor can any Attempts prevail against it, but in the Proportion which the narrow Circuit of Rumour bears to the unlimited Extent of Fame.

We may congratulate Your Grace not only upon your high Achievements, but likewise upon the happy Expiration of Your Command, by which Your Glory is put out of the Power of Fortune: And then Your Person shall be so too, that the Author and Disposer of all Things may place You in that higher Mansion of Bliss and Immortality which is prepared for good Princes, Lawgivers and Heroes, when HE in HIS due time removes them from the Envy of Mankind, is the hearty Prayer of,

My LORD,

Your Grace's

most Obedient,

most Devoted

Humble Servant,

THE SPECTATOR

I had not heard Churchill speak on the wireless for some time, so when I sat with a group of his other adherents to listen to his speech opening the European Congress of International Unity (or, to put it more shortly, Much-Binding-in-the-Marsh\*), in May, 1947, there was a slightly comical expression on every face which said: "There's my boy! That's the way to talk to me," as we relaxed from tension, knowing that he knew how to handle us. I'm utterly useless and futile on all political matters, not (Heaven knows) because I despise them, but because my brain honestly gives up functioning and dies on me in that direction;

\* Pat has just informed me that "binding" in Air Force slang does not mean (as I believed) "hang close together," but a ghastly bore, a frightful fag; I didn't know this, and I'm not interested in what my juniors tell me to spoil my best jokes, but I thought I had better put it in a footnote.

and no amount of reminding myself that nowadays politics concern everybody, and nobody therefore can afford to stand aloof from them, will ever make me participate intelligently. I do not stand aloof being precious and scornful, but, on the contrary, try and join in the orchestra as a person with no ear for music might, yet feels it his duty to pick up a violin and in all humility try and do what he can with it. My gratitude to Churchill and other fighting statesmen (fighting on my behalf, I am well aware) is tinged with what I call the Acorn-Cup Attitude:

"But they do square, that all their elves for fear  
Creep into acorn-cups and hide them there."

And while I listen to them striving to stick together the five continents so that they will adhere and not fall apart again, I think of a certain tube of adhesive cement sent to me, an international sticking-gum; ignoring the war, the four sides of its cardboard container are printed with the legend: "Sticks everything. Leimt alles. Colle tout. Lo pega todo." This is magnificent, and even more so the direction on the tube itself: "Pierce the nozzle with a Diamond Pin, which should then be used as a stopper." I can find a pin, but not any diamond pin. Translating it into rough magic and metaphor, if there were really a diamond pin to pierce the nozzle and to use as a stopper—if there were really in all the world an adhesive cement that would stick everything in four languages, our apprehensions might come to an end. It's good gum as far as gum goes . . . but statesmen are still sparing, still looking for a Peace that will bring peace, instead of the results of the Tower of Babel.

\* \* \*

Onwards from D-day, the papers began to be speckled with appropriate paragraphs, poems, and cartoons, delivered with an air of great solemnity but none the less amusing now that we were able to relax and not feel guilty at cutting the strings which had been drawn too taut for comfort. Even an announcer on the



nine-o'clock news, one of those heroes of apparent detachment during 1940 and 1941, was excited enough to report (in the crescendo of swift movement towards victory on all sides) that: "Marshal Malinovski's Forskis" had broken through! I forget where and when they had broken through, but there is no doubt that the Forskis must have surpassed themselves on the Eastern Front that day. On the other hand, as though to reproach us tenderly for any un-British signs of noisy elation, I cherish a cartoon which appeared in the *Sunday Chronicle* in February, 1945, where the sergeant holds up an attack saying: "Quiet, boys—I think I 'ear the first cuckoo"—Reminiscent of a curious, sentimental, animals-first streak in the English character which was exploited with such affectionate irony and a touch of exaggeration in the film *Tawny Pippit*, where war itself had to be held up, and where the claims of essential tractors and troop manoeuvres shrank into nothing compared with the more essential consideration that a small but rare motherbird was sitting on her nest in the middle of a ploughed field, and might not be disturbed. If only this film had been allowed to rip slightly more towards the fantasy of an early René Clair, or else pulled right back from the perils of fantasy, it would, I am sure, have been as sweeping a success over here as I gather it has since been in America.

Years ago, when the ferocity of Chicago gangsters was of central news value, a cartoon in (I think) the *New Yorker* gave a pretty angle on the softer side of one of these hulking, murderous brutes. For we were allowed to see him sitting miserably at home and just moping: "I'm worried about my canary—he don't eat."

One gets a sort of gentle trickling pleasure over this species of cartoon that depends confidently not only on events and character, but on the gradual infiltration of the artist's malice. Thus Giles had one of his happiest inspirations at the time of the Berlin Conference of the Big Four: A long table; four places marked respectively Montgomery, Eisenhower, Zhukov, and Lattre de Tassigny; four empty chairs awaiting the arrival of these repre-

sentatives of the four victorious powers. . . . And at the head of the table, also waiting for them to come in and sit down, Herr Hitler was already seated, not *quite* at ease, perhaps. The expression on his face was half nervous, half tentatively friendly, a soupçon of defiance: "This will give 'em a surprise!" is the caption. But one could add to it indefinitely. "Will they mind that I come uninvited? Or will they maybe apologise? Will they say 'Come, this makes it all more simple, that he is here after all?' Zhukov, will he kiss me on both cheeks? And also Montgomery? —No, it is not in the English character. And Eisenhower? Might he not say 'Herr Fuehrer, you can be very, very helpful; we sure meant to ask you to come along—isn't that so, Monty? Only then it slipped our memory, you know how it is'—But what is it the English like their military to be? Just a little bluff? So I reply: 'It makes nothing; here I have come, and now let us get down to our muttons, yes?'"

And from our "Esperanto Department": A well-wisher to our advance after D-day whispered this piece of information to one of our officers: "Ich think that there are two German tanks dissimulating in the milk-schop."

At about the same time, a newspaper giving an account of prisoners taken, mentioned over two thousand Germans and "a few unexpected Japanese." I wondered then, and I still wonder, exactly *who* was not expecting those few Japanese among the two thousand? They take their place in my mental panorama of that period, with Marshal Malinowski's Forskis, the dissimulating tanks in the milk-schop, and with that "long procession of Hamburgers" who according to an item of European news from the B.B.C. were seen filing out of the city after a heavy raid.

The catalogue of "difficult to get": A curious catalogue that swelled and swelled endlessly, during the war years, of things that had disappeared from the shops; the tiny lubricants of life; little drops of water, little grains of sand; not the big important

things, but those in constant demand, such as matches: "I *had* a box; I'm sure there were two left in it," and passion rises beyond all proportion: "Some *beast* must have used them!" Elastic, the right shade of darning-wool, pins with points on them; the sort of notebook and the sort of pencil that one is used to, tools of our trade; and the right sort of brushes, the right shade and quality of paint. Films for the Kodak. Fountain pens, razor blades, tissue paper, quinine, stainless knives, veganin, radio batteries, one's own brand of absolutely everything. Dish cloths and glass towels, bananas, long macaroni (the kind that falls in festoons out of the overcrowded mouth), cornflour, potato crisps, rubber hot-water bottles, soap-flakes, cigarettes, gardeners and the plumber's mate ("The minstrel boy to the war has gone" was sad enough to hear in mediaeval days, but it cannot compare with "The plumber's mate to the war has gone"), *War and Peace*, face towels, sponges. . . .

I had an idea for a story, of an unremarkable little man who a few years before war broke out had a strange obligation—not exactly a dream—to garner and hoard all sorts of ordinary but quite unrelated objects, such as those I have listed and dozens more. Almost every day the voice suggested something fresh. He did not understand it himself, but he was compelled to act on this compulsion or he had no peace; though he had to face up to the ridicule of his friends, the dismay of his relations: "Piling up what nobody could possibly want, in such absurd quantities, chucking away your money; making an utter fool of yourself." If he *had* to collect, why not, for instance, make a hobby of Goss china, one from every seaside place he visited? Or Edwardian moustache-cups? Nevertheless, the little man still kept on piling up with a bewildered air the dish-cloths, the elastic, the pins, the darning-wool, the pencils, the films, the razors, the fountain pens, the veganin, the glass-towels. . . . The rooms of his house were getting terribly congested, but he answered all questions with "Don't ask me. I don't know."

No need, of course, to end the story too obviously by showing

how these bizarre premonitions came in useful. A few lines could feature him at the dizzy height of power and popularity, and we would leave him there.

\* \* \*

Properly seasoned wood for furniture was and is extremely scarce. Which explained why certain black marketeers did not even stop at the graveyard gate to procure what was wanted, till at last they were caught and brought to justice. A neighbour of mine at Brambleford was entertaining her very old, very prim Victorian cousin, and told her small resident evacuee, a London policeman's son, aged ten, to keep out of the way as the old lady must not be startled. "You can have a bath, and play the wireless in my bedroom if you keep it very low." And that, she thought, disposed of Eddie. . . .

Suddenly the peaceful drone of work-basket anecdote, looping in relations and old times and domestics, was shattered by the sitting-room door flung violently open, and Eddie, in pyjamas and no dressing-gown, catapulted into the room, frantic with excitement, ignoring orders, but confident of a good reception for his good news: "Wow! Miss Clerk. They're *still* going on about them coffin-lids!"

## CHAPTER VII "You Don't Paint Circuses?"

I have never written *Mystery at Three Guesses*, but I believe it might be a first-class thriller. If anyone had asked the old lady whom we left in the last chapter sitting over the fire in a state of complete bewilderment, to give three guesses at the meaning of Eddie's exuberant utterance on coffin-lids, she might have been as puzzled as I was myself at discovering an entry in one of my (very) rough notebooks of the last few years: "—would be wrong from the point of view of the deeply disappointed hostesses, as it would look as though *they* had minded and badgered S. into making a fuss."

I have stretched out my brains like weak elastic as far as they would reach, and still had to let them snap back without solving the mystery of the "deeply disappointed hostesses." Most of these notes are scribbled down while they are fresh and hot, so there may be somewhere a flesh-and-blood S. who on reading this will enlighten me as to what I meant; recalling Robert Browning's well-known reply to an admirer's question about a certain obscurity in one of his poems? "Madam, when I wrote that only God and Robert Browning knew what it meant. Now God only knows."

In London and many other cities, small clubs or circles or co-teries or groups have been formed, who meet at regular intervals and listen to talks given by writers on writers. Comparing our experiences, some of us have discovered that an old gentleman (with a remarkably fine forehead) attends our lectures punctiliously, sits in the front row, and at once falls fast asleep. . . . *Mystery at Three Guesses*; for is it not pleasanter, quieter, warmer at his own fireside, without that voice going on and on,

impertinently penetrating his outer rim of consciousness? Or, on the contrary, does he suffer from insomnia, and is this, accidentally discovered, the only cure? And does he wake up, saying, "Where am I?"

And why (for instance) have I called this chapter "You Don't Paint Circuses?" On this I will not keep you guessing even thrice; for guessing is a form of torment which I have always detested, even from my childhood. "Guess who's here"; "Guess what I've brought you"; "Guess whom I saw to-day"; "I've got a piece of news for you. No, you shan't hear it—you shan't have it—you shan't see what's in my hand—until you've guessed!" What is the good? One never does guess right: "I give it up!" "Nonsense, you haven't even *tried* properly." Sometimes, in sprightly mood, a loathsome he or she will steal up unexpectedly behind you, clap a hand over your eyes, and while you struggle and foam at the mouth, cry teasingly: "Guess who it is!" To which the only answer should be: "The most utterly maddening and frightful person I know, and I wish I didn't." This modern age has brought us an even worse guessing business over the telephone, if by sheer bad luck you do not recognise the voice accosting you; in a frenzy you guess wildly beside the mark, and often make an enemy for life.

Yet the desire to provoke a guess must be deeply rooted in fable and mythology, and have stolen into folk-lore and childish games; blind-man's buff—you have to guess whom you have caught before you may snatch the bandage off your eyes. Fairytales are full of challenges to guess: "Rumpelstiltskin"; the Princess had to guess the dwarf's somewhat polysyllabic name; no use to call him Bill and hope that would meet the case.

But I digress (we had noticed it!) and I may easily digress some more in this chapter, which is called "You Don't Paint Circuses?" for it has worked out as that sort of a chapter; a "Pages from My Diary" chapter had I ever kept a diary, for which a peculiar talent is required—and apparently the gift of a beautiful volume of blank pages to last five years, with a clasp that

fastens with a *teeny* lock and key: *Mes Larmes* by Blanche Amory. Or the journal kept by Julia Mills for the comfort of David Copperfield when he was young and in love with Dora:

Miss Mills, for the more exact discharge of the duties of friendship, kept a journal; and she used to meet me sometimes, on the Common, and read it, or (if she had not time to do that) lend it to me. How I treasured up the entries, of which I subjoin a sample!

"Monday. My sweet D. still much depressed. Headache. Called attention to J. as being beautifully sleek, D. fondled J. Associations thus awakened, opened floodgates of sorrow. Rush of grief admitted. (Are tears the dewdrops of the heart? J.M.)"

Nevertheless, I prefer not to scatter my dewdrops of the heart in diary form. I must have been introduced a little too young—or a little too old—to Marie Bashkirtsev; it was a pity I had already read Stephen Leacock's parody of her famous diary, and that the Freudian theory was at about the same time becoming a wide-spread explanation of nameless discontent; for I could not help comparing Marie with a diary kept by Dorrie in *What Katy Did*:

March 12—Have resolved to keep a journal.

March 13—Had rost befe for dinner, and cabage, and potato and appel sawse, and rice-puding. I do not like rice-puding when it is like ours. Charley Slack's kind is rele good. Mush and sirup for tea.

March 19—Forgit what did. John and me saved our pie to take to schule.

March 21—Forgit what did. Gridel cakes for brekfast. Debby didn't fry enuff.

March 24—This is Sunday. Corn-befe for dinnir. Studdied my Bibel lesen. Aunt Issy said I was greddy. Have resollved not to think so much about things to ete. Wish I was a beter boy. Nothing pertikeler for tea.

March 25—Forgit what did.

March 27—Forgit what did.

March 29—Played.

March 31—Forgit what did.

April 1—Have dissided not to kepe a jurnal enny more.

Instead of a diary, for the last fifteen years or so I have had a compulsion to jot down not only my Philosophic Speculations and random notes on Highly Interesting Happenings (as the one quoted earlier, about S. and the hostesses), but also not to lose sight of those queer days—days queerer than other days—a day either as crazy as a Marx Brothers' film, or on the contrary, a day that seems by an under-current of significance and coincidence to form itself into a pattern of more coherence than our days usually achieve. When it gradually reveals itself as "one of those days," I do not like to see it blown away, so I secure it with a paper-weight.

*April 17, 1947:* Weather imitating Mendelssohn's "Spring Song," so that Elizabeth arrived that morning bubbling and brimming over like a baby brook, and I was hardly surprised at her strange unwillingness to settle down to work. For her mood linked on with two conversations I had already had that morning with the two girls whom I (an early waker) was pledged to rouse at 7:30 A.M., one in the next room and one on the telephone, so that neither should be late at their respective jobs. When my cajoling voice penetrates their wilful slumber, both treat me in the unfair spirit of those readers of St. Augustine who imagine that he *wanted* unbaptised babies not to go to Heaven: that is to say, as though it gave me peculiar personal pleasure to rouse them from drowsiness and drag them from their warm beds. One, after a pregnant silence, always says "Thank you, Peter," in tones of injured politeness; and the other, struggling to unwind the mufflers of sleep, drowsily protests: "Oh Peter, it *can't* be," but afterwards springs into quicker life than the mournfully polite girl. One day at breakfast I had a discussion with her on this very subject of work and getting up: for she believed she would not mind early rising if it were for domestic necessity—getting the children off to school, getting her husband off to work. She contended that it was the daily compulsion which set up resistance in her hyper-delicate subconscious. But in that case, I argued, enjoying my breakfast, while (hating me) she drooped over hers,



your early rising would be even more of a compulsion than now, because as they would have to go forth under orders from school or office, the urgency of your rising on their behalf would necessarily precede theirs. Then, noticing the remains of cross sleepiness drifting between her and my wise abstractions, I repeated them, putting it in a different way; and then again, using an especially happy metaphor (except that it did not seem to make *her* happy)—and by that time I daresay she wished all writers to limbo, though she merely answered over her shoulder as she went off to dress, that going *out* to work in the early morning was “fundamentally against the grain.” But whose grain? Hers? Everybody’s? And did she mean that if by any chance she ever had a job in an antique furniture shop, and could sleep *in* where she worked, on an antique four-poster bed, among the Chippendale and spinets and Waterford glass, that would be as satisfactory to her grain as domestic pre-occupation?

Anyhow, neither Elizabeth nor I were working at home that morning, for we had two urgent errands, one at the typewriter-place, and one at the optician’s. At each of them we were accosted by a mechanic, crabbed and thin and elderly with steel-rimmed glasses, which began that dream-like sense of duplication and “Is this really happening?”—an integral part of one of those Queer Days. For except by the wildest coincidence, they could hardly have been brothers; a pity, for it would be nice for them to compare notes at home that evening on how they had disliked the very sight of us. The first of them was delighted in a sneering sort of way when he discovered we had left the key at home by which to unlock the typewriter on which we were seeking his expert advice. All the fun was with him on that visit, for he was presently given an opportunity to tell us that the machine which I had bought “as new” was a 1933 model, and I had been sold for a mug again.

I should like to digress here for a few moments on those rather

painful "mug periods" in our lives; for I have just come out of one, or for all I know I may still be in it—my next purchase will decide that. But I hope that a touch of nature, reputed to increase the kinship of the world, may be that we all run into periods when everything we buy, sometimes with quiet confidence, sometimes in high triumph, proves impossible to use, uncomfortable to wear, a maladjustment in the home, and bearing little relation to what it cost, what it looked, or what we were told about it. From these periods I have extracted the rueful motto: "Cut your losses." The typewriter, the garden table, the leather coat, the Baby Hoover, the dessert gooseberry bushes, the half-dozen pullets, the blue shoes, the picture of a ruined castle (but more of this hereafter, dear reader), the crocus lampshade, the radiogram—I am not pretending I bought all these in the space of a week: this mug's period has been running now for about eighteen months, on and off, and there have been one or two small successes to qualify it: the lawn-mower, the preserving-pan, my black coat and skirt, the red wire-topped note-books, the flotilla of Chinese game ducks, the Nevinson water-colour. But, on the whole, mug's purchases predominate . . . and I was just feeling the typewriter was the last straw when the thin, sneering mechanic suddenly became benevolent and helpful and Mendelssohn's "Spring Song" rippled again into the vernal air.

Set to this invisible music, we were accosted on the top of the Duke of York's Steps by two pretty Welsh girls out to see London; very young girls, breathless and excited; "Please can you tell us where we are?" in the singing tongue of Fluellen and Lloyd George. The incident happened in rather a good spot for my London pride to take a fling, and when I pointed towards Piccadilly it was on a note of awe that they asked: "And is that where Nelson is?" Eros may be all very well, but it is right and proper that Nelson should come first.

In St. James's Park, rows of daffodils followed two schools of thought, by Wordsworth and Herrick, under the bomb-battered

walls of Carlton House Terrace. A small magnolia tree was in brilliant bloom; several almond trees had burst into spring-song after the longest winter—did the Meteorological Office tell us since 1865? A veil of willow green trailed into the water. (How many chapters ago did I remind myself that R. L. S. forbade use of the word “green” in describing scenery?) And a drake chasing a wood-pigeon across the grass in a rather mistaken state of rapture led me into such a reckless mood that I stopped to buy white grapes off a barrow in Regent Street; reckless only in my own case, for when I was young, Mother had prohibited all barrow-buying on the grounds of you-don’t-know-where-they’ve-been. Her idea was, presumably, that fruit bought decently in *shops* could be followed from a clean birth to an honourable death. Early prohibitions die hard, and I was amused to think with how little logic she would have suspected the jolly young vendor who recommended us to choose a browner bunch than the one we had already selected: “You’ll find they’re sweeter. They may not look as good, but—’ere, you try,” and he pressed Elizabeth to have a grape on him, so to speak, off the browner bunch; a minute later, we were both violating convention by spitting grape-pips into the gutter.

All that spring and summer were to be made magic for Londoners by barrows piled high with fruit we had not seen in such abundance for years; fruit brilliant and accessible, yet fantastic against the grey background of our sober city as trophies of Goblin Market, or as Venetian barges swaying with their load of peaches and melons and nectarines along the Grand Canal at early dawn.

The little group of good-humoured painters whom we found on ladders outside our front door when we got home, washing the green paint which had not been spring-cleaned since 1937, had been before the war a familiar spectacle, with their pots and brushes and boards. I had often thought that house-painters in Edwardian Mayfair could provide a stimulating and picturesque ballet, and delighted to welcome these back again to their haunts.

I brought them out cocktails to mark my thankfulness, and all went merry as a marriage bell.

Waiting on the mat was an invitation to lunch from Dilys, maybe to intoxicate ourselves with an optimistic plan to do a wine-tour all over France in September, 1948—touch wood; or touch Stafford Cripps; touch him for a pony; an idiom difficult to explain to a foreigner anxious to learn good English. (N. B. It never came off.)

I was somewhat dashed at some "stills" which had also arrived, of Jean Simmons and myself being natural at the piano at Pine-wood Studios, during an off-moment while shooting *The Woman in the Hall*. Then I decided it was nonsense to state in black and white that I was as old as all that, and entirely the fault of the studio gremlin. Accepting that one is just as old as one feels, I could *never* be as old as that nonagenarian on any stills. . . . I tried not to remember stills of me (and Marlene Dietrich) on the RKO set; and again on the set of *The Green Pastures* with Marc Connelly and black King Pharoah.

To distract myself with something prettier, and still in pursuit of the spring motif, I took in my arms for close examination a tall young tree growing up nearly to the ceiling from a pottery jug that stood on the had-for-a-mug radiogram in a dim corner of the sitting-room. Pat had brought in a chestnut branch from the florist to give me on a day in March when snow and black frost had started yet again after the fifth "thaw" (*sic*), when I was so disappointed that we could not get away to my country cottage and the chestnut trees and the stream and the Downs. The branch was barely sprouting, then; now, five weeks later, it was bursting in all directions, pushing out green shoots and green leaves, almost too natural and flourishing for the decorum of a set of Georgian chambers in London. Rather embarrassing; what can you do with it if it goes on growing at that pace? You cannot murder a young tree; it may not die of its own accord. . . . And inconsistently, I filled up the half empty jug with fresh water.

From then onwards, I imagined that this freakish day might

have exhausted its display of spontaneous incidents in the Human and Ridiculous category; and for a few hours it appeared that I was right and that it had gone normal.

But the spring song started up again at a famous restaurant in Covent Garden: towards 8:00 P.M. Genial with drink, the rubicund man in a party of four dining at the next table rose and lurched towards us, and with tremendous politeness and many flourishing bows and gestures and apologies for intrusion, gave us his name and asked my reluctant host for his, so as duly to formalise the situation. He then suggested I should "settle a little argument": Was I—an eminent—woman painter? He painted widely on the air, to demonstrate further what he meant. And found my denial too hard to believe. "You—*don't*—paint—circuses?" I remarked that he must mean Dame Laura Knight. This staggered him: "You're—*not*—Laura?"

"No, I'm not Laura. I wish I were." For an instant he stood incredulous, then seized me warmly by the hand, shook it with a fervent pump-handle motion, and invited us to double brandies all round. We politely declined, being still at the fish course. Seven times during dinner he came over to our table and repeated the performance—"We want you to settle a little argument." . . . In the interim he frequently stood on his chair and played an imaginary violin. Sometimes he shouted across to my deeply embarrassed host, and having apparently taken a fancy to his name, sent it ringing down the restaurant. On the final visit he was accompanied by the other man of the party, hitherto with his back towards us, whom we had somehow imagined sober, and rigid with misery. To our astonishment, he too genially apologized and invited me to "settle a little argument." . . . They were both enamoured of this courteous phrase to open conversation. More handshaking all round, and then Drunk Number One wound up with: "Mr.—Asterisk. Are—you—going—to—stand—me—a—drink?"

My host's gentle negative can be imagined. And we paid and left.

This next Queer Day lies undated among my notes, though mention of *A Night in Casablanca* should help me to place it in 1946, and leave the rest to those two stern governing words scribbled in the margin: "verify" and "warning."

And when I distinguish them as Queer Days from the rest of my days and weeks and years, I am really meaning the opposite: that these days are significant compared with the rest; because all our days are slightly crazy, but when we begin to notice the motley bits and pieces that make them so, we ourselves in thus assembling them are perceiving rather more of the design than we usually do. I believe they are days that we do not take in our stride. There was no special reason why I should not have taken it in my stride, when the cosy fat woman at the chiropodist's who had once informed me that she knew my feet like the palm of her hand, came out on this special afternoon with the astonishing revelation that she regularly did a swallow-dive from the highest board in Parliament Hill Fields. In the American idiom I would have gasped "Well, what d'you know!" and indeed, it seemed the only remark to meet the case; the swallow-dive—skimming through the air and just dipping her beak along the surface of the water, yet there she squatted with her little instruments, large and voluble and fiftyish, a comfortable woman. . . . How painfully cramped and conventional we are apt to be, judging our neighbours' capabilities and taking it for granted that they have none; yet even among those who live in close daily contact with us may be swallow-divers of the first rank.

A parcel of food arrived that morning from Denmark, yet sent by Johnny in America, with a card to sign in several different languages to state its safe reception. The insurmountable difficulties of what we could leave on the table for our supper that evening after seeing the new Marx Brothers' film (the first for seven years) were thus miraculously settled by collusion between America and Denmark; it contained tins of tongue, of beef dripping, of butter and of cream. One dared not exactly call it an answer to prayer: to pray for food is allowable, but not perhaps

for specified food, not for tongue, beef dripping, butter and cream. One does not want to come home to rootle vainly in the larder, after seeing the Marx Brothers; one comes home, so experience had taught me, hungry and happy, with a strong desire to remain happy but not hungry. Another minor miracle occurred at the cinema, when we were shown to our seats by an usherette with an abnormal solicitude for my comfort and safety; an usherette who was mother, nurse, and lover all in one. She slanted her torch to make a path of light exactly where my feet would need to tread, instead of carelessly seven miles down the aisle or direct onto my very diaphragm; and then she caressed me into a seat. I have never seen her again—perhaps she was a mirage.

Just before the picture started, Elizabeth and I discovered that Win had never before seen the Marx Brothers. It was much too late to do anything about it except place her between us and watch her with lynx eyes till her spontaneous laughter was fully established. You cannot ever foretell the result of the Marx Test, and friends who have given satisfaction in every other way have been known to say without any shame: "Well, I don't know—they never make *me* laugh."

Returning home in a heat-wave to our tongue, our beef dripping, our butter and cream, we went rocking up the Rope Walk in the highest spirits, with an exchange of rapid, un-Albanian wise-cracks that were a tribute to the infectious powers of Groucho, Harpo, and Chico. (But Nannie said: "Oh, you've been seeing those silly men!")

During supper it occurred to me that we had seats for *Crime and Punishment* only two nights after *A Night in Casablanca*, which it might resemble a little too closely for comfort; a step over the border-line from *The Brothers Karamazov* to the Brothers Marx—"and state reasons for choice," as in one of those slosh-and-plod essays set in school examination papers—linoleum essays, somebody called them (unluckily for gratitude, I cannot remember who it was).

"The difference between the Marx Brothers and *The Brothers Karamazov* is that the second is a book by a Russian author, and the Marx Brothers are four comic American film actors who always act together. They talk very fast and rush about a lot and audiences laugh, though not all audiences, who sometimes do not laugh at all. One of them gave it up, so now there are only three.

"Dostoevsky's books reveal the Russian character as nearly always unhappy, though usually we are not told why; thus we can see that it is a wrong idea to compare them with the Marx Brothers. The only thing the same about them is that sometimes people get killed in both, but even then it is not quite the same.

"If I had to choose between the Marx Brothers and the Brothers Karamazov, I think I ought to choose the Brothers Karamazov, because they are a little more sensible."

The following Queer Day is dated, which is a relief: *March 28, 1947*. It began with a telephone call from Kate, just back from Portugal to tell me what had happened to her and her party of eight (so much less romantic than *Pieces of Eight!*). That must have been a swell moment for all of them when one of the party was taken ill, and the Portuguese doctor, having a little English, diagnosed the small pox. . . . Smiling at himself, he corrected it presently to the *little* pox, the chicken pox.

This was a legitimate and therefore welcome 8:00 A.M. call. But my regular working hours from ten till one apparently did not achieve, on March 28, 1947, that padded immunity from interruption for which we strive, nearly always in vain. Few of one's friends realise or understand, however often they are told, that when they ring up and say: "It's quite all right; I don't want to speak to her; I only want to leave a message," they might have equally well called me from my desk to twenty minutes' pleasant chat; sanctuary cannot be sanctuary unless all sound is cut off, or unless someone constantly present can be perpetually on the alert to field telephone calls; but hardly any of us nowadays can retire for several hours to a wing inviolably cut off from human sight



and sound; nor do we have parlour-maids or butlers to guard our inspiration. "Yes, but your secretary," they argue, stubborn, unconvinced; and: "You're so lucky to have a secretary; other people . . ."

I dictate my books. If I stopped every time I heard the telephone and waited while she answered it, wondering who it was, wondering when she would come back—oh, well, this is hanging out an old grievance, like washing on the line; though I do sympathise with a friend of mine, a busy doctor, heard to protest on the telephone, in a voice choked with rage: "You mean to tell me you've rung me up just to say your husband is *better*?"

Yet I can see as well the point of view of the person at the other end of the telephone, for I have occasionally offended in the same way, not in forgetfulness of work, but forgetting exactly what were their working hours compared with mine. When they remind me, and I hastily apologise and put back the receiver, I cannot control my first exasperated reaction, which is the result of feeling snubbed: "They sound as if they were the only people who ever did any important work! No need to have been quite so *affairé* about it; it would have been quite enough to have said simply: 'Sorry, my dear, I'm working; can you ring up later?'" Which is, in effect, exactly what they *did* say.

On this particular morning, among other less enjoyable calls, came a gleam of amusement from an unnecessary cook (I was already suited a week before) who grandly gave as a reference: "Mrs. Wright, *née* Mrs. Leslie Henson." I happened to know Gladys Wright (Gladys Henson, *née* Gladys Gunn) and so was able to pass on to her that according to her ex-cook, she had been born a married woman.

After lunch I spent an hour over a task at which most of us have laboured twice or thrice in a lifetime—transferring the contents of one's battered, crowded, redundant old address-book into an elegant new one, clear and empty, bound in the best morocco leather; an address-book to lie flat on my writing-table and do me credit with everyone who catches sight of it. Of course I had put

off doing this at least fifty times; it was a "one-day-when-we-have-nothing-else-to-do" sort of job; a light job and pleasurable, about as pleasurable as the job of the angel who originally had to produce order out of chaos. It takes about three weeks to get as far as the letter D: that is because every name you know begins with A, B, and C.

Your whole psychological process is involved: So-and-So is not really a friend of yours any more; you never want to see her again, do you? You are not even sure if that is still her address; didn't someone say she'd moved? All the same, if you *did* want to trace her, if any reason should crop up, a professional if not an affectionate reason—letters get forwarded from old addresses—so better put the old one in, too; *and* the one she sent you afterwards, marked "temporary." At this point you begin to get angry with yourself; surely the whole point of a new address-book is not to lumber it up with a whole lot of old addresses you will never want again? Can't you face it that addresses, like bread left too long uneaten, become stale in the larder? And what more depressing than a stale address?

There *is* a more depressing thing, only too relevant to what you are doing. Amazing how many people whom you had known, and known well, have died since you last tidied up your address-book. No good copying them in again, but each one is a pang; a separate pang that you had when it happened, and now again. For were there indeed so many? Have you grown so old, or have they died so young?

A different and less painful hold-up occurs over the names totally unfamiliar: Who on earth—You *must* have known at one moment who they were, or you would not have written them in so firmly. It's your own handwriting. Incredulously you repeat the name with every pronunciation possible. . . . Down in the forest nothing stirs. Rather futile, surely, to copy complete strangers into the new elegant morocco volume? Nevertheless, it goes against the grain to leave them behind, derelict. They may have some terrific significance. You may be only suffering a

lapse into this deep amnesia. How would *you* like it, to be abandoned in an old address-book just because your dear friend had forgotten for a moment who you were? Better copy them in. They have that "abroad" look about them, even though their English home is called Sans-Souci; probably you met them on the Continent, spent three weeks never out of each other's pockets, and then . . . and then. . . .

Following so much intensive brain-fag, it is quite a relief to have to decide merely whether the place from which you sometimes hire a car, and the alternative cheaper less reliable place, and the third more expensive but swifter-in-emergencies place from which you sometimes hire one, should be entered under "Car," "Garage," or their own name? And might it save time to put all your American friends who live in America under "U" for "U.S.A."? Whatever is not certain, it is certain that directly you look up an address, your mind becomes wayward and capricious and cannot find it, only to fall over it six months later looking for another address, when you remark fretfully: "Well, of course, I never thought of looking for it under *that*. I must have been mad."

The friends who should at once be cut out of your life when you are making a new address-book are the nomad tribe, those restless beings who refuse to settle down. Fourteen addresses crossed out already . . . and as you copy out the fifteenth into its new quarters, with all the neatness that a clear shining page, clear shining pen, and clean blotting-paper can lend it, you mutter in anticipation a grim refusal to substitute a sixteenth in a little while, simply because that person cannot settle down and keep still. Better lose them altogether than sully the page with homely erasures.

*An hour later:* No reason, come to think of it, for plodding on, copying out beastly things like "Income Tax, P.A.Y.E."; copying out ten thousand recommended (and probably requisitioned and wrecked) hotels under "H"; or with nostalgic yearning to pause at "D" and consider four doctors scattered all along the coast of

the south of France. For it must be time to start, if we are going to hear that discourse on the Love of God, by a theologian well-known for his blend of eloquence and reason. I was already in the hall when the postman dropped in the letter for which I had been waiting for some time in suspense; a letter containing the first criticism from the first person to have read the manuscript of my new book *No Son of Mine*. It happens, I shall never know why, that I care more about this book than for any I have ever written; therefore, *quod erat demonstrandum*, I was more vulnerable than I should have been to the first professional opinion I was to receive.

Not favourable.

Naturally I had to scribble a reply, hot-pen, in hectic championship of my beloved child; and, of course, I had to destroy this reply, not send it . . . and then pull myself together. In consequence I was late for the sermon on the Love of God, which might have been exactly what I needed if I could have heard it; but, being late, I sat at the back, parted from this timely remedy for a black mood, by a particularly obstreperous acoustic.

Home again, I wrote a letter that was mild, not mad like the previous one; promising to cut my manuscript (which beyond all doubt it needed), though *not* to cut it "down to the minimum"—a phrase which somehow got my goat, and not a nice goat at all, a goat searching for its scape.

I wish I did not run to length. I wish an editor or publisher would *once* write to me with a tactful suggestion that I should expand instead of cut. I wish that all my books of 100,000 words had not originally been written as 160,000, my short stories of 4,000 as 7,000. As for my articles and book reviews of "not more than 1,200 *please*," whole pages are dragged out and scored through, while from a wrung heart I groan: "But I *can't* lose this. It won't make sense. It will spoil the whole thing. It's the *best* bit!"

This was Thwarted Day as far as it had gone—and the afternoon's end was thwarted too. After dialling TEL wearily for half

an hour, I decided to give up and go out and send my telegram from the post-office round the corner. . . . And then what do you think, dear reader? The phone bell rang just as I was leaving the house, and it was TEL apologising for having kept me waiting.

"But I woke up, and it was all a dream." No, that would be the old style of fairy-tale. This, in more up-to-date terms, was a case of the wishful-thinking nerve too powerfully developed, so that it overwhelmed probability. And the trouble is that I cannot even remember, at the moment of going to press, whether that did or did not happen? Fiction or fact? Fantasy or autobiography? For frequently an incident in the reality of daily life proves the door to a fantastic short story. As for example, Auntie's glove-box.

Her glove-box appeared among the loot from thirty-six cases, Saratoga trunks, packages, wicker baskets, Gladstone bags, and portmanteaux, which my sister and I inherited in 1940. The unpacking of these treasures from the storehouse of Rakonitz past glories, subduing the extraordinary truth to credible hues of fiction, I celebrated in a chapter of *The Young Matriarch*. ("It's a fair Ichabod, O' Man," said Mr. Polly. "There's no going back to things like that.")

Gradually our legacies from the 1890's were distributed, if they did not crumble to dust directly they were brought out into the daylight, like the picture of Dorian Gray, or Agamemnon and Clytemnestra in their tombs.

Brightness falls from the air,  
Queens have died young and fair.

Yet the glove-box was made of more stubborn stuff than queens, and obstinately survived all unfair wear and tear. Naturally I did not keep gloves in it, sixteen-button gloves, white or pearly grey or a faint distinguished beige. It stands on my dressing-table, and I keep my old clothes-brush and my useful Maison Pearson hair brush buried in it, so that the more useless ivory brushes, also Auntie's, can lie out on the dressing-table. For I once had a housekeeper who said that her mother said you

can always tell a lady by her ivory toilet-set. And it does not do to neglect such precautions.

The box is of grey-green plush, the lid held down firmly by a sort of brass net-work. Alan brought me a pair of gloves from Paris during that strange last month of the war, when undreamt-of luxuries turned up suddenly here and there at wide intervals, and we stared at them with that dazed Am-I-Awake? Rip-van-Winkle look. We had seen gloves like these before, but only as relics of the past, subjects of the sort of ballad beginning: "They dwell in mem'ry as a far-off scent . . ." (could be continued indefinitely, but one line may be enough); gloves of kid so soft and delicate that they could be drawn through the eye of a needle—and I do not mean a gateway in Jerusalem.

Now we merge from fact into fiction. . . .

Our heroine (and I am *not* our heroine: I am inventing her; you can always tell, because I give them fair hair, red or bronze), our heroine happened to delight in their pale peculiar shade, not grey, not green, but that silvery tint on the *under* side of an olive leaf after it has rained and the sun comes out and the *top* of the leaf is dark green, almost black. But try explaining all that in a shop in 1945 when you want to buy anything—a scarf or a hat—to carry on the colour-scheme and appear at last for a brief while as a perfectly dressed woman. The only colour that exactly matched those gloves was Auntie's glove-box; so as the plush could not be detached from the box, our heroine carried it under her arm whenever she wore the gloves, and invented a romantic New Arabian Nights legend to account for her chic eccentricity. Gradually the gloves wore out, or she grew tired of them, or lost one, but she was committed for ever by her own tale to carrying the glove-box. You may have seen her yourself, dear reader, wandering in a half-witted way along Bond Street. . . . Alas, poor lady!

Now we merge from fiction back into fact. The story may seem a wee bit fragmentary because I could not think of a legend strong enough to web her in her own untruth. Actually, Alan's

gloves are a brilliant violet. (It was a blouse from Lugano which matched the glove-box, and that had been bought to match a hat from a shop in Piccadilly, and that had been bought because I liked the colour; it reminded me of the underside of an olive leaf after it has rained and the sun come out, and the top of the leaf is dark green, almost black, and I once lived for five years on a hill planted with olive-groves, above the Mediterranean in Italy.)

The porter said when he brought the gloves along, "A gentleman left this"; and I, opening the parcel, hoped it would be "something useful"—which suggests that we had by then got into a fatal frame of mind; because I am afraid that by something useful I must have meant something to eat. Not but that Alan's long string of presents could be edible, decorative, exciting, reckless, and romantic, everything by starts and nothing long.

Dashing ladies of the Edwardian period would have worn those beautiful violet gloves without hesitation. They went with their chinchillas, their sables, their ostrich feathers drooping from their velvet hats, their lace, their leisure, their subtle fragrance, their muffs which nearly always had a bunch of silken violets pinned on to the fur. Violet gloves seemed a little startling without these adjuncts, but I have worn them two or three times without collecting a crowd; and anyhow I like to possess a pair of gloves in delicate flexible kid. . . . If I could bring myself to turn out the Maison Pearson brush, they could lie in Auntie's glove-box.

He never gave me a muff; but if ever you have seen a story of mine which was to have been called simply "The Muff," this passage of stark revelation reveals again how the mind of an author works.

I wrote it as the story of a woman who had once lived in the sybaritic comfort of fair cities. She had been evacuated with her children during the raids, and, unable to get a servant, she lived in rough squalor in a cottage that had no comforts of any kind, and did all the work herself. Just as she was wearily trying to get

the kitchen fire to light in a howling north-easterly gale in the depths of winter, the post brought her a present. She slowly undid all the tissue wrappings, and lo and behold (some incidents cannot be written without "lo and behold") it was—a muff, a velvet muff edged with fur, with a fall of lace and a spray of silken orchids and a wave of perfume. A muff in which Edwardian ladies kept their beautiful idle hands tucked deeply so that they should remain warm and idle and beautiful. Sometimes when they were photographed they held the muff coquettishly against their cheek, smiling from behind it, or they gaily waved and signalled to a friend across a restaurant. . . . My heroine was badly in need of household soap, of dish-cloths, of a rubber hot-water bottle, of shoes that did not let the water in, of a bucket that did not let it out. The arrival of the muff was an irony that went long past tears. She stared at it, first in savage revolt . . . and then, somehow, reverie stole her from the fifty jobs that clamoured to be done; she was so terribly tired; she did not even know, as she sat there with the muff on her lap, that the fire had gone out and that winter cut in by the draught under every door and window, till her feet were numb with cold. . . . But her hands, her hands were beautifully warm.

Certainly Alan brought along short stories, as well as gloves and perfumes and hand-bags and hat-boxes. During one of his visits to England, he occupied an exclusive service flat, but owned to me that he was rather disappointed with the amenities, except for their peerless shoe-cleaning department; he said he had never had his shoes cleaned with such perfection and finish; that it was a treat, in the morning, to find them standing outside his door reflecting the world like a mirror, and to recall the state in which he had put them out the evening before. I was attacked by raging envy. It happened that though I had much to be thankful for, a perfect shoe-cleaning service was not among my benefits forgotten. Then I had an inspiration: I suggested to Alan that when-



ever he was passing my way, he should collect a parcel containing a pair of my dirty shoes, and always in the evening neatly set them out beside his own in the corridor; and take them in again the next morning; and leave them on me (as convenient) in the course of the day. You see what bewilderment might spring from that simple idea? Lady's shoes and no flesh-and-blood lady to account for them; ghost-shoes that came and went; the invisible woman; rumour, scandal, the loss of a reputation. . . . No, I never wrote that story, either; and my shoes still do not reflect the world like a mirror.

H. G. Wells once remarked in a preface to a collection of his short stories, that he went through a peculiarly receptive period when any slight occurrence or object, seen in his daily life, would set his mind whizzing off along a series of bright little pictures (a film sequence, we should call it now), and in less than no time he had his short story complete: "The Door in the Wall," "The Purple Pilaus," "The Truth about Pycraft" (he had heard a man remark, "I want to lose weight," instead of "I want to lose *fat*"). The period came to an end, but it was grand while it lasted; fun for him; nothing wasted, and for us an abundance of pleasure, an interest and excitement for which we can never thank him enough.

To define waste would be a waste of time. Yet I have attempted to give an example in one of my Queer Day entries; no date; though plausible clues are sprinkled along the pages by mention of a film called *Thursday's Child*, and daffodils in the window-boxes, and an indefatigable talk on Sussex which Rodney and I kept getting on the wireless after lunch whenever we tried for Yehudi. Yet this persistent talk-on-Sussex was not mentioned in that day's paper nor in the *Radio Times* as coming from any region at any hour. Were we dreaming? Was this already yesterday or tomorrow?

"Yehudi at last, and we relax and I watch the"—For some peculiar reason (and I cannot even add "best known to myself," for it is not known to myself at all) I have cut out the next four lines with a sharp pair of scissors, and against this lacuna the word

"life" is scrawled in the margin in red chalk, not in my handwriting, and underlined four times. After the cut-out space, my diary goes on:

At the Interval, an Honourable Chinese gentleman was to discourse on music, while I was supposed to dash over to the Aeolian Hall in time to hear the *Kreutzer Sonata*, having bought one ticket that morning before I saw about Yehudi on the wireless. But I decide not to. Abandoning the Honourable Chinaman without rudeness, Rodney and I pace up and down the Rope-Walk between the daffodils, for air and exercise. London in early spring. Back again; to fill in time, they have put on a record of a charming bassoon solo, very simple and naïf and fetching; strange, to hear music through *two* boxes. Then Yehudi again. And suddenly I think of my empty seat at the Aeolian Hall as a clear example of irretrievable waste and the answer to "What is waste?" Waste is where *no-one* benefits: I am not there; they cannot give away my unoccupied seat in case I do come; the Hall and the artist would have profited just as well from someone in it as not in it; no extra shillings to them that I am sitting here instead. . . . A little walled-up enclosure of waste without exit or entrance.

(No date): Then I went out to a quiet dinner at Boulestin's; we passed the crowds outside the Empire waiting to see the Stars—I wondered, was it the night before or that very night that I had seen the living sky brilliant with stars, after weeks and months of winter when I had not looked up for fear of falling on the snow, on the ice, on the sleet, on the slush and rain and puddles of the pavement? And I wondered what I might find at dinner tonight to reward me for renouncing my guest-invitation card to see Robert Taylor and Barbara Stanwyck *in person*?

I found Chevalier Montrachet 1926.

*Fuel Crisis Day (February 24, 1947)*: Papers, read over breakfast, provide a great deal of astonishment by the variety of what one might be going to find on what page, in defiance of the once familiar layout; their passionate outbreak of courteous hospitality to "Guest Editors," friend and foe alike, whose own weekly papers have been suppressed, went on no special plan or method, so that we were quite likely to find a cartoon from the *Recorder* in the middle of the *Financial Times*. The spirit of General Post and "After you, sir," "No, I beg, after you!" makes for a delightful irrelevance.

*Profound thought*: Nobody thinks, in to-day's world; and when they do, they'd much better not have.

That entry, too, was dateless, as all eternal verities should be; but the next in my Queer Day Series was definitely attached to memory by a date: *August 15, 1945—the first V-J day*: Victory over the Japs. We had already had V-E day . . . when Barbara explained on a somewhat ambiguous preposition why she was keeping her voluntary date to make munitions locally once a week: “I *can’t* leave off—you see, it’s for the Japs!”

An American stranger stood in the doorway, shyly asking for me. A little puzzled, I revealed my identity, until he said, his voice burdened with diffidence, that he was bearer of a present of silk stockings. “Come in!” I cried, as who would not. Four pairs sizes nine and ten (I take nine-and-a-half), and a card from the giver, another stranger, to say she was sending them as a “mighty small return” for the pleasure my books had given her for years. Her paper was stamped simply and exquisitely, “The White House, Washington.” That gave me a thrill. Her friend who had brought them, and had himself worked there all through the war, had left his birthplace (Kennington, London S.E.) twenty years before; homesickness had been his portion ever since . . . and now at last, on his return, he found that he fitted in as though he had never been away. “It’s my home, you see,” he said contentedly. “Been a bit knocked about, of course, but just as I’d always dreamt it.”

The Day of Folly when I was compelled to do everything twice: writing a cheque, going to the toyshop, arriving at the wrong time for the chiropodist, and so forth.

And the Day when I was compelled to cancel every positive action: Hoover to be repaired—not to be repaired; to be—not to be (Hamlet and Hoovers).

The fur that I ordered—and cancelled. My better nature.

Unnecessary engagement I made and unmade.

America, America.

(My final brief but pregnant paragraph will remain for ever unexplained.)

*Day of First and Last Things:* The last Alexandra Rose Day in Brambleford, June, 1946. Nan selling, in streams of rain. I drop my bunch of silk violets from Paris in her tray, for a contrast with the roses. We split everyone's ear-drum by telephoning them without first saying our instrument had been mended yesterday after three years of only carrying confused whispers. Nan came back streaming wet and cheerful—gave her a hot bath and a glass of rum to avert rheumatic fever, and heard about the cross man at breakfast at the hotel who first snapped out "No" when she asked him to buy a rose, and afterwards, when all the rest of the room had contributed, fished out a pound note and growled that he gave it on condition that Rose Days for Hospitals supported by Voluntary Contributions would continue in spite of . . . (deleted remainder, but it was about the government).

Round about here I broke off, wondering whether something had gone a bit out of order (like the Hoover) in my diary of Queer Days? I had hastily scrawled them into whatever notebook happened to be handy, in the comfortable knowledge that years later I could sort them out at my leisure, arrange them chronologically, and throw away what had not survived the corrosion of time. But time had been at it with a vengeance, for I seem to have run several days into one Day that never was on land or sea. I read on, hoping for a clue to answer my own question-marks: apparently the rhododendrons were out; apparently *The Winslow Boy* was on; apparently the war was over:

. . . The Rope Walk in the sun glowing with rhododendrons still in full bloom. Trays of improbable cocktail dainties are being carried up for a party on the next floor; they give an illusion of the old pre-war window-box-and-awning-for-the-season atmosphere.

Cyril rings up to ask if he can come along at once and discuss a radio talk he is to do about me and Charles Morgan to France, in French; waiting for him, I discover my black suède shoes have

been stolen, and I've lost my wicket-gate key which I had put into "a safe place." My Safe Places have become a terror to the household. Perhaps if I only had one, but I have four or five, and when a frantic search in these drawers, boxes, and repositories still does not yield the missing keys, first-night tickets, clothing coupons, passport, season tickets for picture galleries, the one pair of silk stockings as yet unworn (I mean the pair that will always remain unworn, because I cannot bring myself to break the taboo), income tax receipts, wireless license, cleaners' tickets—then it slowly dawns on me that I must have found a yet safer place than my proper Safe Places, and if only I can remember where that was—

One *must* have safe places; otherwise things get lost. But I think all people who have been concerned in my daily life wish that I would just *let* them get lost in the normal way, when perhaps there might be a better chance of finding them.

Interview with Cyril in which we show him doodle-pages as a sample of how I work; he is bewildered, but (I hope) respectful. He wants to include a reading of my short story "Grand Inquisitor," and I ask if the French have cross-words? Yes, the French *do* have cross-words. Cross-words are the basic Esperanto.

"Grand Inquisitor" is a tale of the traditional "little man," the eternal Kipps and Mr. Polly type; meek, diligent, unassertive; the worm who may turn one day, or he may not. I called my little man "Leslie Farmiloe," under the impression that there was no such name; but directly the story was published, I received a cheerful letter from a real Leslie Farmiloe telling me what fun it had been to read of his prototype; he was not angry, which is something to be thankful for; this real-people-with-the-same-name business is an eternal nightmare to authors; obviously we never intend to mean *them*, or we would have carefully altered the name, but I gather that is an argument which usually cuts no ice. The Leslie of my story lived with a big, successful, bullying brother; every Sunday morning he sat sedately in a corner watching Big Brother wrestle with Grand Inquisitor's cross-

word, the back of his neck growing pinker with the effort, incomprehensible mutterings and baffled oaths showing the odd way that dictators take their pleasures. One Sunday morning, however, Leslie could control himself no longer; leaning over Big Brother's shoulder, with an odd little smile he rapidly filled in all the words still left blank. Too rapidly . . . Big Brother guessed. With a sudden roar he seized Leslie by the throat and strangled him. The jury should have acquitted him on grounds of sufficient provocation, but none of them were cross-word puzzlers. Big Brother was hanged for the deed, and the family thus died out. A simple little tale and, I thought, peculiarly English. I should like to have heard it in French, but naturally on that night our wireless had a perverse fit and would yield nothing but North Country comedians.

Supper brought in our first Camembert since the war began and ended, though I was told that our troops in Normandy, a week after D-day, vowed they never wanted to taste a Camembert again, and shouted "A Cheddar! A Cheddar!" as they rushed into battle.

A ring at the front door; an old lady for the party upstairs thought we were the lift. The *lift* . . . in Albany! This must be the first time it had ever happened. She nearly died when Elizabeth opened the door into a well-furnished hall.

I found the wicket-gate key in not a safe place at all, and Win and I departed to see *The Winslow Boy* at the Lyric.

It was at the Lyric Theatre that I first saw "my name in lights," when Frank Vosper went into management in 1930 with *Debonair*, and Celia Johnson made her name in the title rôle. A year before she had shyly presented herself as a candidate for the rôle of Toni in the American company of *The Matriarch*; we refused her (and took Jessica Tandy, another beginner) on the grounds that her legs were too long and her eyes too large. . . . Nemesis had an answer up her sleeve; since then, has there ever been any part in any play of any year, when we would not all fight and tumble over ourselves for Celia to play it?

We had the most perfect seats for *The Winslow Boy*: on the centre gangway of the fifth row when the fifth is the first row to have a centre gangway.

The play was based on the Archer-Shee case, reminding me how Alexander Woollcott had ended an essay on that subject, by saying that only in England would one be likely to find the Admiralty, the House of Lords, and the whole legal profession, not to mention every newspaper in the Kingdom, putting their backs into the effort to discover whether a small boy had stolen a postal order for five shillings. "Let Justice be done."

This play excelled in its intuitive feeling for a happy ordinary family's reactions when an extraordinary event prevents them from continuing their lives in a happy ordinary way. The younger boy, a naval cadet, was accused of stealing a five-shilling postal order. From that moment onwards, father, mother, grown-up sister, elder brother—each had to sacrifice their normal careers as a contribution to vindicate young Ronnie, who once he had convinced his father that he was telling the truth, got so tired of the case that he could fall asleep while Mr. Winslow read aloud the discussion of it in the House, or while away the afternoon at the cinema, while England breathlessly awaited the final verdict; nothing hyper-sensitive, nothing of "Eric or Little by Little" about young Ronnie. "We won, didn't we?" he remarked when he came home. This was absolutely right; so was the attitude of his elder brother, a "knut," talkative, pleasant to all, fond of the girls; he could not believe in Ronnie's innocence as their father did, but it did not seem to matter to him very much one way or another; he remained affectionate even when he had to give up Cambridge as his contribution towards clearing the boy's name.

The cross-examination in the home, by which Sir Edward Carson's prototype satisfied himself as to Ronnie's innocence by pretending to assume him guilty, was a magnificent piece of stage-craft, with an indignant Ronnie demanding: "I say, whose side *are* you on?" By then, the audience wanted to ask that too,

unaware of being skilfully led up to one of the best curtains in the present-day theatre.

How often since seeing *The Winslow Boy* have we released any growing state of tension by quoting, half furious, half laughing: "I say—whose side *are* you on?"

The period feeling was good, though with that not unpleasing element of naïf surprise in it, when a young dramatist writes about a time within memory to us older ones, but to him already history.

We walked home by short cuts; the Rope-Walk was drenched in loveliness, a clear, fair summer sky showing at either end, and the milky gleam of the rhododendron blossoms ranged in stone urns all along the formal walk. . . . Was it in the same place, at the same time of year but in 1936, that I had met Henrie tearing along, her evening-dress swirling around her ankles, arms and neck bared to the heat-wave? She was desperately afraid of being late for a play by one Terence Rattigan, a new young dramatist: *French Without Tears*; her husband was one of the backers, so they were in that state of first-night trepidation. "We're going to have an awful flop!" she cried. So returning now from *The Winslow Boy*, I naturally glanced up to the window where a stripe of light showed that the Rattigan Boy was at home and (one primly hopes) hard at work on his next play. Curious, when we have been out and enjoying ourselves, our priggish reliance on a colleague's unflagging industry; whenever I meet Terry sauntering down the Rope-Walk, I wonder why the idler is not working? Probably he thinks the same about me.

On a certain night that Sophia had come up from Ruston during the war, for a little mild London dissipation, a deafening raid rocked the air and shattered each sentence as we spoke it. It was about the usual time for Nan to return from day duty at the nursing-home; she would be half-way along Bond Street by now; my ears strained for the clatter of her feet on the flags, but I was hardly prepared for the sound of *two* pairs of feet. . . . She brought in a beautiful girl, still made up for



the stage, leading a white poodle. I should have known her by sight; it was Leueen Mcgrath out of Rattigan's play *Flare Path*. She explained, apologetic and charmingly shy, how she had come straight on from the theatre to have supper with her agent on the next floor; but she had knocked and knocked and could make no-one hear. Little wonder; he was one of our A.R.P. men out on his job. It was so eerie, she confessed, to stand alone on the stone staircase in all that pandemonium of guns and exploding bombs, her thundering knocks a mere whisper against the door. And what was she to do with Michou? So Nan had brought her in, and she flopped down on the hearth-rug, and we all ate and drank and talked like old friends. . . . And Sophia pretended to think that this was gay London life as it always functioned, with beautiful strange young actresses, grease-painted, bringing white poodles into the room after bedtime.

*Salute the Soldier Day (early April—I believe—1945)* (Why on earth can't I put down the exact date of things while I still know them?)

This passage in my diary of days was scribbled over with several "identification" marks. I will present you with them all: Before D-day. War. *Te Deum*. On my gratitude motif. F.4. London Pride. Several question-marks.

Going with Kate to Buckingham Palace on Monday morning to see the "Salute the Soldier" March-past in the sunshine; Royal Standard flying; King and Queen and Princesses out with a special guard of honour to take the salute; buds bursting from the bare trees. . . . All the way along the Mall from the Admiralty Arch you saw them draw nearer, and heard the bands—the Coldstream Guards, the Scots Guards with their pipers, the Canadians in bright green, flash of dark grey silk legs as the W.A.A.F. reminded us this was not the Last War nor the One Before, but emphatically This War. A group of men marching along in any careless old clothes, everyday coats and slacks, shabby pullovers and so forth. . . . You thought at first they were some of the

lookers-on who had got mixed up with the procession by mistake . . . till you heard them get the loudest cheer of all, and realised they were the Merchant Navy, words to thrill us forever . . . Dunkirk words.

Those military pundits still and always to be found in all the voluntary services, male and female, who insist that uniforms must be worn punctiliously without allowance for heat or the sudden stress and urgencies of war on the home front—they should have been present to hear how we all felt about the "uniforms" of the Merchant Service as they marched past.

Last, the tanks: the Churchill tanks and the amphibious tanks lurching and crashing and jarring along the Mall, huge, hideous embodiments of blind machine-made force and the will-to-death. And suddenly it struck us in thankfulness, and in shame for not enough thankfulness, how easily those might have been German "Overlord" tanks swinging and crashing down the Mall towards Buckingham Palace while we watched them in silence. As in 1940, along the Champs Élysées to the Arc de Triomphe, while the Paris people watched them in silence. But the British Standard still flew over our Palace, and our King and Queen and Royal Princesses still stood there to take the salute, and we were free to laugh and cheer and say what we liked—for these were *our* tanks.

*Te Deum laudamus.*

*Te Deum.* Saturday afternoon on the sands. The pent-up sunshine has burst through at last. And the people have brought out their most flamboyant colours for the pleasure of once more wearing red and cobalt and lilac and buttercup yellow; not new clothes freshly chosen and made up for the festival of the year, but creased and shabby and one would say out-of-date, except that the answer would naturally rise: "What date?" Perhaps it would be truer to say they are gloriously *in* date: *Summer of England, 1945.*

Not many old people; not many courting couples, nor bloods,

nor belles; a conspicuous absence of lads-of-the-village; here in their thousands are little groups of young mothers, young fathers, families of very young children; until recently the father may never have seen his younger child, nor even sometimes the older ones; and the mother for years has had to think of them officially as "évacuée children." Yet it is easy to fall into natural, contented habits with what is your own, not bothering to stop and remember and sentimentalise over how long ago since they had last put on those discarded slacks, open shirts, shorts, bathing trunks, those cotton dresses and sunsuits and sandals, casual and comfortable.

"Come on, Dad!" is the predominant cry; for he is moving a bit slowly, thoughtfully filling his pipe. In the old days, he would be relaxing into Tired Business Man on a well-earned holiday; now he goes to relieve his wife, lift prams, carefully lead Jennifer or Douglas into the water, carry Angela on his shoulder. . . . These fathers from the wars returning show a special tenderness towards their children under five.

All around the edge of England is Carnival. At last the people have come back to their seaside. The huge crowds at the station battering their way into the trains have a different look from the same crowds who removed their children inland when the Flying Bombs began. Now, though oddly more silent, less defiantly cheerful, their patience has a different quality; they know that once they have safely squeezed their bodies through the barrier, beyond the tunnels paradise is waiting.

Nearly all the jolly old pagan properties of the seaside pageant are back again; bathing-tents; poster announcing the Nigger Uncles starting next week; band on the Front, playing Waldteufel, Gilbert and Sullivan, Sousa; rowing-boats afloat in the curve of the jetty; sailing-boats staggering across the radiant water; picture postcards for sale; cream ices everywhere; chart on the bandstand of high tide and low tide, no longer of importance to the enemy but essential from the bathing point of view; notice about the red flag to be hoisted when the sea becomes

stormy and bathing dangerous; white cliffs and rocks and rafts and shells and seaweed and sand-hoppers. . . . Standing aside, automatically respectful to a van unloading war material, we realized with a leap of thankfulness that it was only a huge freight of deck-chairs! That was a brave moment in our brave old world.

Then what has visibly changed during those five years? The houses along the front are scarred; the bandsmen wear khaki with white straps marking them as stretcher-bearers, instead of blue and gold or scarlet and gold as they had been in that fairy-tale period known as Days of Yore; a unit of convalescent New Zealanders scattered about, look pleasant but a bit irrelevant. A good many of the little shops are still boarded up. . . . In 1938 I had heard two townswomen chatting in the High Street, and in 1945 an echo drifted along: "If there's going to *be* war, it's not the *danger* I'll mind, but what it'll do to *commerce*."

"Ah, that's it, you see. *Commerce* . . ."

What else is missing? Proper buckets and real spades; rubber beach-balls and rubber animals; and for the same rubbery reason, girls are actually going into the sea without bathing-caps; quaintly, there are also no donkeys and no goat-carriages. (What can the war have *done* to the donkeys and goats?) The staff at the hotels, who used to be weary and experienced and off-hand, are charming and unpractised, newcomers arrived from doing something quite otherwise; you can tell that, from the ingenuous way in which they appeal to you for help when they are lost in unfamiliar activities.

And sometimes, idly meddling with the powdery sand, my fingers came in contact with a piece of rusted barbed wire.

White steamers with puffs of smoke drawing attention to their proud passage on the horizon: may they be the very *Channel Belles* and *Mary Elizabeths* who had set out to bring back a defeated army from Dunkirk? And again an incredulous thrill of contrast reawakens at the arrowhead of planes slanting along the sky overhead. From over there where the enemy could almost

have leant across to touch our familiar sea-side, the invasion might at any moment have begun to appear. And since the residents and workers who remained on the edge of England would have seen it first, the thousands streaming down to the seaside now, view them with a touch of awe; not because of the greater peril they have been in (most of the visitors have taken their share of raids or battle), but because they have been cut off from the rest by a thick black curtain of "Defence Regulations," "Prohibited Area," "Careless Talk Costs Lives," and an aura of mystery still surrounds them. For—what had they *seen* all this time? Will they tell? "Better not ask for a bit. . . ."

Only one house standing halfway up the cobbled path to the cliff, with a name "Cosy Nook" (which as a small child I thought the loveliest in the world), still has its barbed-wire barricade round the walled garden, investing it with a significance sinister to the peace-time visitors, who as they pass murmur names equally homely, equally associated in their minds with Secret Operations and the Admiralty: Fido, Pluto, Mulberry . . . names after all not so far removed from Cosy Nook, nor from those now scrawled in chalk on the doors of the beach-huts: "Creamola," "The City Slickers," "This'll Do," and an exultant "Sans-Souci."

From all around the shores and little bays of England this shrill exultant paean was swelling to the windy blue sky, in a close-woven fabric of sound that was almost physical in its intensity. Many of these million children whose ages run roughly between two and eight have never before seen the sea and the rocks; never before scampered with bare feet and the sand squeezing up between their toes, down to the very rim of the waves when the tide is far out; never before watched the fantastic spectacle of a disturbed crab scuttling sideways. Yet they take and accept heaven without surprise, as their birthright, their heritage, something which deep down they have known about and waited for with longing, rejecting all substitutes like "the country." The mere country is no playground to a race that has

always gone to the sea for its holy days. And I murmured a line from Christopher Smart's *Song to David*: "The kids exult and browse. . . ."

Towards six o'clock the sands gradually begin to shift and reveal gaps; empty deck-chairs are thrown down or loll at tipsy angles; the close pattern is breaking up, and the evening trek goes in slow file towards the steps, mounting to the parade and the boarding-houses and apartments. Children's bedtime. After supper the grown-ups who do not have to stay on guard assemble in rather quieter mood round the bandstand. The vacant sands look a little cold without the sun on them. A few solitary figures are still down there, liking it or pretending to like it. . . . Final strains of "God Save the King," the bandsmen quickly disappear, and the usual old man in the usual semi-naval clothes whom we deliciously associate with our seaside holiday, is heard to remark that the glass is rising and tomorrow ought to be hot.

## CHAPTER VIII    Headlines Across the Sky

Lydia was my new maid; young and pretty, light-hearted and irresponsible, she looked as though she had not an idea in her fluffy head except boy-friends and perms and the flicks.

On her first evening she asked me if I could lend her something to read. I went straight to a pile of books I keep entirely for lending: "You'd like a thriller?" It would of course be that, or a nice love story.

Emphatically she shook her head. "No"—a pause. "Got any biographies? I like biographies best." (Staggered pause, and frantic search along my shelves for a suitably easy biography.) "Got the life of Tchaikowsky?"

I suppressed (*a*) the fatuous desire to say I did not know he had a life, and (*b*) a hopeful impulse to ask: "Do you mean Tchekov?" because I could have done better at Tchekov. But she meant Tchaikowsky, though Tolstoy came under discussion; and she also warmly recommended Dunne's *The New Immortality*, with a dissertation on the idea of infinity contained in it.

Three weeks later she ran off with my best Jacqmar scarf; a pair of black suède shoes, nearly new; a pair of brown kid gloves, a clinical thermometer, and my suitcase. After a while she returned the thermometer *in* the suitcase, anonymously.

Nevertheless, our brief dialogue on the subject of books had suggested severe self-examination; for surely I should have been able to hold my own with Lydia? Surely I ought to have read that life of Tchaikowsky? What, in fact, *had* I been reading recently? People always said to authors in a trustful way: "I wish you'd tell me some good books; *you'd* know! Not too deep"

So I searched through the bundles of untidy folders into which I always rammed any notes I had scribbled down or picked up at random during the current years, on no system whatever, but merely that they should not slip through the chinks and be altogether lost. And I was appalled that in this motley though fairly comprehensive record, this variety show of all that had impressed me, I did not find one single reference to one single book of any nature whatsoever.

What does this indicate?

I don't know.

Are you fond of reading, Miss Stern?

I don't know. I thought I was.

It was obviously of no use to recommend myself to myself as a student and a Little Bookworm, by hastily adding a lot of notes, and then pretend they had been there all the time. Neither did I want to be highbrow about this; what had I *enjoyed* reading? I therefore tried to remember what books had actually and in honest fact stamped themselves on my mind.

Lydia or no Lydia, biography emerged with a strong list to starboard. Elizabeth was surprised at my choice of phrase. But why? It should have been fairly obvious for years that in essence I am a nautical character, spiritually mated to Ratty in *The Wind in the Willows*: "Believe me, my young friend, there is *nothing*—absolutely nothing—half so much worth doing as simply messing about in boats. . . ."

*Madame Curie* by Ève Curie.

*The Shoemaker's Son* (Hans Andersen).

Osbert Sitwell's three volumes of autobiography, *Left Hand, Right Hand! The Scarlet Tree* and *Great Morning*.

Una Pope-Hennessy's *Charles Dickens*.

*The Tale of Beatrix Potter* by Margaret Lane.

*Chesterton* by Maisie Ward.

Lives of Browning, St. Francis, and Stevenson by G. K. Chesterton.



Robert Louis Stevenson's life of Fleeming Jenkin.

All the lives of R.L.S. that had ever been written.

The lives of everyone connected with R.L.S.: Henley, Gosse (*Life, Letters, Father and Son*), Meredith, Fanny Osbourne, Sidney Colvin, Henry James, and, linked for the same reason to this company, Denis Mackail's life of Barrie, and Barrie's own fragmentary autobiography, *The Greenwood Hat*.

Life of George Macdonald by his son; the life of Queen Adelaide. (A book-list makes strange bedfellows!)

Life of Charlotte Yonge by Georgina Battiscombe.

A life of Trollope that in effect worked out as a fascinating life of his mother, and then ceased to be fascinating; but then many years ago I had read his own autobiography, which alienated everybody when published, not for its revelation of a dissolute career, but on the contrary, for its revelation of a writer's career divided into regular hours of work, so many words a day; an excellent programme.

*Both Sides of the Blanket* by Halcott Glover, valuable for its odd new angle: telling us about George Eliot obliquely, by way of the story of George Lewes's wife.

Rebecca West's *St. Augustine*. The *Confessions of St. Augustine*. I listed this rather defiantly, recollecting how I had once shocked a friend by mentioning it as autobiography. Still refusing to submit to this curious segregation of religious books, I added the biography of Friedrich von Hügel by his niece, preceding a fat, enchanting volume of his letters.

*The Wound and the Bow* by Edmund Wilson.

*Tellers of Tales* by Roger Lancelyn Green.

*Essays* by George Orwell. These last three were biography in essay form.

Hilton Brown's *Kipling*.

A life of G. F. Watts called *The Laurel and the Thorn*.

Alexander Woolcott's letters.

Biography and letters are almost inextricable. I find it hard to suggest which should be placed first; letters, perhaps; they arouse

the sleuthing instinct that will set you studying the life which supplied the personal dossier for the letters. And when I speak of personal dossier, I do not mean *Secrets of the Du Barry Boudoir*—that type of thing. All the same, biography cannot be enjoyed at arms' length; I am not even sure if it should be written at arms' length. Whether reading or writing biography, and especially when reading *for* writing it, a gradual, intoxicating intimacy with our subject is bound to help enormously in what Freud called sublimation; our own sublimation. For our pre-occupation with self is never so tiresome nor indeed so perilous while we regard our importance, as when we perpetually fiddle with our unimportance; therefore any widening of our range of knowledge will, without our realising it, authorize us to lay down the law (in the best, not the worst meaning of the phrase) on that particular territory, going far to dissolve undue feelings of inferiority and unimportance. And when in time one man's biography becomes familiar ground, it will present you, as a trifling gift by the way, with a vision of coherence covering this one man's life fully understood, linking forwards and backwards and sideways; becoming strangely part of a universal design, though the subject of the biography will probably not himself have recognised any such design.

In choosing the object of either a detached study, or mating enthusiasm with integrity (according to whichever school you may belong), it is certainly less troublesome to choose a man or woman whose life is already made indelible by death. For if they are still among the quick, they are liable to disconcerting movements, vital and inconsiderate, contradicting what you have already painstakingly evolved and set up in permanence.

Red light for danger: it is safer, if you have a tendency towards biography, as reader or writer, not to settle and remain at only one subject; for though there is hardly a limit to research, from a state of blessed certainty about one human being, you are apt to become vaingloriously proprietorial. This warning is signed by one who knows!

Writing biography as distinct from fiction, represents a forfeit

of our liberty; imagination may no longer reign as lord and master. For instance, I was lately writing a chapter of fiction where I discovered I had sent a man to meet his death by a car accident without having had his lunch first; as I began the scene between two men waiting in the library for their lunch to be announced, and as I knew in *Marcus* I had created a character (or the character had created itself) who would *not* have ordered the car and gone off just as lunch came on the table, it was still in my hands either to alter the time of day, or to insert a paragraph to the effect that all through lunch he was moody and preoccupied, and then to let him rise abruptly and go without bothering about coffee.

I once had a letter from Somerset Maugham about *The Young Matriarch* (a sequel), accusing me of reckless sadism in killing a character directly I did not want her any more. But my theme required the death of Toni, for the sake of the Rakonitz Orphans motif. We who are in control cannot always force our invented characters to be what we want them to be, but we can at least, within reason and character, guide them to do what we want them to do. Besides, people do die. (And anyhow, as Evelyn Waugh once said, I am a one-corpse man; my books are not littered with bodies.)

But when you are strictly controlled by real events, you must play no tricks, correct no facts of time or place, though they may lie like boulders in your way.

Autobiography should be as severe, but maybe it is always influenced by the lying twist of ratiocination. If Cain had left behind an autobiography beginning "I was born of poor but honest parents" (the first to start a chronicle in that way), he would, no doubt, have gone on to tamper with the facts of his upbringing: how he *always* got blamed for what Abel did because Abel was his father's favourite and a get-away-with-murder boy! (By the way, in the *Girl Guide Book of Badges*, "Legends of Saints," the legend of St. George really does begin: "He was born in Cappadocia, of poor but honest parents.")

I came across a note for two short stories, both founded on fact and both on an autobiographical theme; and against them I had scribbled a note: "See if laziness can be overcome *before* including these in this"; by which somewhat obscure remark, I suppose I meant: "Why not work out these ideas in short-story form, length 2,500 to 6,000 words, before polishing them off in a few lines of one chapter for *Benefits Forgotten?*" Apparently laziness was *not* overcome. The title of the first was "Inconsolable." It was to be about a widow tragically bereaved, who wrote an autobiographical lament for her famous husband revealing him as a man without peer, thereby getting him off her chest to such an extent that she was able to absorb herself in a new and flaming affair. But her book was published after such long delay that she had almost forgotten it; it became a terrific *succès d'estime*, she was deified as a Figure of Mourning, and had to renounce her new and flaming affair and surrender to the title of the story.

The other note would have been rather more fun to work out: again an adoring wife writes the biography of her famous husband, but in this case he was still alive, and her embarrassing worship translated into cold print made him look a fool instead of a hero; so that once the book was published, his friends began to bolt in an opposite direction when they saw him coming. He tried to live it down, failed, left her abruptly, deteriorated, and went rapidly downhill. When he eventually did die, his previous career inspired another biography to be written by a gifted modern man-of-letters: debunking the hero's perfection by frankly showing up his subsequent imperfection. The modern man-of-letters had never made much money before, but on this he unexpectedly did well, and married the widow of his biography's subject. And the story would end ironically, showing him quite unconscious that the same indiscriminate hero-worship from the same incurable woman had begun its process of deterioration on him.

Both women of my unwritten stories were being "film fans," soppy and extravagant. For genuine hero-worship, *not* film-fan-

ning, you have to choose a hero who can inspire a sort of incredulous respect as well as a mere thrill.

Romantic hero-worship is very nearly, if not quite, the same thing as a love-affair. Nearly all outstanding stories and plays of school or college are based on it, as the strongest emotion of that period, and grown-ups flock to see them: *Frühlingserwachung*; *Young Woodley*; *Mädchen in Uniform*; *Journey's End*; *The Guinea-Pig*; *The Hidden Years*. Or in novels: *Regiment of Women*; *Mr. Perrin and Mr. Traill*, and a host of others.

Maybe, though not aware of it, we are sick of plays about love and marriage, and welcome a theme which treats (without lewd or sniggering reactions) monastic segregation or its female equivalent; *Journey's End* merely carried this segregation and hero-worship a little further on, into the war years.

Owing to the censorship, these themes are still a degree fresher and more original than the ordinary love-and-marriage theme; they have not been hung out so long on the clothes-line to air and dry for everyone to see. And it is a theme localised to nearly everyone's experience: the school years, the adolescent years; so to an adult audience they take on a nostalgic quality to claim our interest; schoolboys and schoolgirls themselves are not usually interested; *they* see glamour in plays about adult love, which they imagine lies just ahead of them; and have naturally no desire to step backward and escape from it all for a little while. For school plays have this virtue as well: they cannot end on any note of finality, but necessarily on a sort of question, more restful than on a happy-ever-after note; in these times of change and what-is-to-happen-next, happy ever after is apt to leave us impatient and sceptical.

But hero-worship, unlike fairy-tale endings, will never have the door slammed in its face. And if real life does not oblige us for the moment with a live hero, biographies will supply him. The study of a man's life, his unconscious demonstration of what can be done from start to finish, has a steadying effect on you, like keeping your hand on a rope alongside when you are crossing a

precipice. This regiment of men and women who evoke romantic hero-worship apart from their direct achievements usually have potent qualities of splendid, generous vitality. Churchill has it, with a rare force of personal impact; Francis of Assisi had it, and Roosevelt and Nelson and Robert Louis Stevenson and David Lloyd George.

I first met Lloyd George in the early 1930's; he was a splendid-looking old man, and as vital and entertaining at breakfast as at dinner. I can still see and hear him as he described the Welsh preachers with flowing white beards and bare feet, who used to come striding down the hill into the village street when he was a small boy, and gather crowds around them, urchins and veterans offering themselves to their tremendous eloquence. And here Lloyd George's blue eyes would flash bluer, and his silver hair seem to blaze and crackle round his head, and his voice ring out with the same vibrant note as the preachers who years before must have held the little impressionable youngster spell-bound; while his forefinger emphasized one of their parables, his favourite, of the pilot on the Sea of Galilee during a raging storm! Three times he refused to turn and go back to shore: "And if we sink," he said, "*the bows will still be towards Galilee.*" Lloyd George swore that his whole life, as well as his oratory, was built on the memory of these ancient preachers. And looking at him then (across the breakfast-table), I was easily moved to believe that their spirit could have passed into our Prime Minister during the early period of the 1914 war, the losing period.

Here in his own house at Churt, Bron-y-de, Gaelic for Breast of the South (even though it faces north; a perpetual twinkling joke against his secretary, who must somehow have been responsible), the dining-room chairs and table were hand-made in oak from the estate, every chair equally comfortable with broad arm-rests, not only for those at the top and bottom; for Lloyd George, though an autocrat, was fundamentally aware of good hostmanship. And Jellicoe, Maurice Hankey, and Winston Churchill used to

discuss and decide with Lloyd George what was to be done, also gathered informally round his breakfast-table in Downing Street during that black hopeless time when the tonnage of the shipping losses was heavier every day. "Och, it was dreadful. Every morning when we came down, the first thing we saw was the loss in tonnage. . . . And it seemed there was nothing we could do to stop it. Jellicoe said he *couldn't* stop it. And then I decided to try convoys. He said they'd never keep pace. But they kept pace beautifully. I remember at Boulogne, seeing the long line of little steamers and the torpedo-boat leading them. And so we got him round, at breakfast, to say 'Yes.' I said we *had* to have them. If they rammed each other, which was the worst that could happen, we'd be no worse off than now. But Jellicoe was too clever a man—you *knew* when he was wrong, but he could put it so cleverly that you couldn't get at him. I'd always far rather have a stupid man at the head of affairs at a time like that. All these old sea-admirals brought up in the tradition, they wouldn't listen when younger men came to them with ideas; they resented it: 'What, teach *us*? Men who've been in the Service for forty, fifty years, to be taught their business by a *middy*?' And the 'middies' got a black mark for even bringing along their ideas. But I encouraged them. And so we got the paravane—a device that's pushed in front of ships to explode a mine prematurely, and the hydrophone by which one can listen for the enemy submarine *through* the water, and then throw your mine and shake its plates to make them come loose. And the method of smearing ships with saccharin, so that they and the whole water were suddenly picked out with fire, white and luminous and brilliant, and you could easily see the periscopes of submarines sticking up out of the water on a moonless night. Once, Winston and I landed from Boulogne after a miserable visit to France; and we saw the little Celties of eighteen marching out, the last to be called up, about five feet four; and suddenly out came the white fire all over the black water. And another idea, eight tall concrete towers we'd have planted across the Channel to make a

bridge with nets between to catch . . . bad fish; only the war ended before they were ready. You can still see one of them at Shoreham.

"I don't think anyone realises on how few brains we won the war. The attics—you know what I mean?—the men at the top—they were our weak point. Ah, but luckily they were the weak point on the other side, too. Look at the Kaiser, led by vanity, vanity all the way, and if it hadn't been for Bethmann von Holweg's liver . . . The Germans were simply waiting and waiting for orders to march on Paris in 1914, but they had no one at the top to give orders. They were the finest army of men and officers in 1914 that ever took the field. I'm a Celt—'superstitious' if you must put a name to what I'd call a miracle of God in March, 1918; they broke the gap in the English-French front and could have marched through and on to Amiens—and they didn't. Ludwig told me it was because there was a snowstorm which caked the wheels of the ammunition-carriages. 'Why didn't you move *after* the snowstorm?' 'Och,' he said, 'a sudden outbreak of "flu," the Spanish "flu," the plague, Providence.' . . . *And who's behind a snowstorm*, tell me that?

"I sent right round every Front to try and find one of the younger generals to justify giving him the General Command at that desperate stage of affairs. What a chance missed for a youngster! But there wasn't one, not one. So I insisted on Foch having it. 'A *Frenchman*?' everyone squealed, 'set over *us*?' As if that was a time for patriotic indignation. It didn't matter a damn if he could do the trick. Luckily Haig agreed, otherwise . . . we'd have been lost.

"When I asked Ludwig about von Mackensen, the answer was: 'Puss-in-Boots.'

"But you're not eating? Don't you like my honey? We make our own bread. We could stand a siege here. I wonder, will Bron-y-de ever be besieged?"

And he boasted that his guests who breakfasted with him were given Bron-y-de honey, Bron-y-de eggs, rich yellow butter and



cream and home-made bread, jam from that year's ripe gooseberries, and apples from his orchards; and that he gave a lunch party at which only his own produce had been served, and Keynes had passed a motion that his brawn should be subsidized but his raspberry wine prohibited. I myself can testify that his heather mead was hardly a drink for the gods, unless, maybe, the gods of Valhalla.

In front of the house a heather garden, purple and red and white, richly attracted the bees. Lloyd George surveyed them proudly as they gluttled themselves on what he had provided. He was like an old god of fecundity, his brain teeming with plans of perpetual increase, yet already his orchards doubled the blossom and fruit of any other man, and his hens, his ducks, his turkeys and geese gave birth to twice as many young; they dared not do less. He could not bear slowness. I have heard him rage with impatience on the telephone. The present generation's contempt for Gladstone he dismissed with a scornful: "Do they imagine that a giant of Gladstone's capabilities couldn't have adapted himself to *any* circumstances?"

Philip Snowden was his nearest neighbour and friend; that delicate, lame man with his clear-cut pallor, his integrity of frost and ice, and the rare smile, sweeter than I have ever seen on the face of any politician. Though they were not of the same party, Lloyd George felt towards him the protective affection of a strong older brother who did not know himself what illness was. When Snowden broke down from over-work and nearly died, during his long painful convalescence Lloyd George used to send in literally the cream of his dairy produce every day; and he related with delight that on Snowden's first reappearance in the House, as he limped past he smiled and whispered: "*Your* cream did this."

He had a great affection for Winston, too, and was for ever talking about him. He believed that politics were more loyal than people always supposed, and not nearly as corrupt: "But you should keep in the same place, and then your constituents will learn that they can trust you." In a speech at a Zionist meeting he

threw out: "Your three great Jews, Moses, Isaiah, and Jesus," expecting them to flinch at the third name—"And they did! They did!" Furthermore, he said, Christ was "not a man who noticed his surroundings or cared for practical comfort and luxuries. He had a culture and a fineness above all that."

As for reading, Wild West stories competed with historical novels, provided they had happy endings; D'Artagnan and Alan Breck were his heroes; braggarts who justified their vanity and were really brave men.

He asked me, laughing, who was the greatest bragger on earth. And answered his own question: "A landowner showing his friends round." Of the thieving birds he said: "Let them eat. I'm willing to pay for my orchestra." He spoke of himself as "the old grey fox whom they can't catch in a trap"; and he discoursed as a professional farmer on wire-worm, the cabbages, and the rooks. Then again, his thoughts back on politics, he mentioned the Dole: "It's a water-cart to lay the dust; when the dust rises, you get the Revolution." His tastes were for butter-milk, Rhine wines, and champagne, and Pilsener beer at the end of a walk. His own bedroom at Bron-y-de was butter-milk again: an innocent room with pale walls; a single chest of drawers in his own holly wood; sepias, very tender and sweet, of Welsh mountain scenery. But in the most sumptuous of the spare rooms stood a screen of sea-waves worked in blue silk, a present sent to him by the old Mikado as an offering after the "First World War." On a desk in this room stood the inkstand made of the hoof of the cow which had kicked Mr. Gladstone in—I forget which year: "presented to David Lloyd George by his loyal constituents."

We visited the small chickens, and the new cherry orchard on vast fields of brown earth which he had just reclaimed from wasteland; in a wood farther off, yesterday's bonfire was still smouldering under its ashes; so we set it roaring again, Lloyd George dragging up a wheelbarrow with loads of brushwood and heather and bundles of sticks, throwing them on recklessly to feed the flames, gleeful as any boy on Guy Fawkes day. He chose a

stick for my collection, that time or another time, from the nut-hedge bordering one of the fields: "I can't cut it for you now with the sap rising, but it's a good one, straight and strong," and he knotted his coloured handkerchief round it, so that he should recognise it in the autumn. He was quite right: it is a good walking-stick, and I still use it perhaps more than any other; on the silver band he put the inscription: G.B.S. FROM BRON-Y-DE. LL.G., and I felt it to be a stick with virtue in it.

One night he chose to retire to bed early, and made a solemn, statesmanlike departure at 10:00 P.M., overburdened with piles of manuscript, reference books, files and so forth, for the last volume of his *War Memoirs*. He even sent Frances for several more books that had been forgotten. We were deeply impressed, and stood talking of him for a few moments in the shadowy room, after we had turned out the lights, meaning almost at once to follow his example and go to our beds. Indeed, he thought we had, for presently we heard stealthy footsteps . . . and not seeing we were still there, he entered and tiptoed across to fetch a cheap edition of a Zane Grey Wild West story-book which he had inadvertently left lying on the bench in front of the fire. Then he caught sight of a bottle of lollipops, known as "satin cushions," picked out one with care, a yellow one, and with his cheek bulging, tiptoed away again.

Undoubtedly the Wild West beckoned him with its adventurous schoolboy lure. Nearly every evening while I stayed at Bron-y-de, and especially if we were alone, he and Frances and I, he would insist that his own private little cinema should present a selection from an ancient library of films, most of them old-fashioned Westerns, cracked and flickering. Wearing a no less ancient mole-coloured velvet coat and waistcoat, he sat between us on the couch, absorbed and entirely happy at seeing cowboys plunge down into the ravine and ride madly straight up the wall of the precipice on the further side in pursuit of the Wicked Sheriff who had carried off Brave Bessie the Good Sheriff's daughter. Yes, he approved of cowboys. He disliked people who cut elegant snippets off pears and apples and ate them with a

knife and fork, instead of boldly burying their faces in them.

Frances and I and, I think, Sir William Beveridge dined with him in his London flat on the night when he had consented to speak on the radio for the first time. He left us there to listen in, when he went off with many misgivings to fulfil his engagement at the B.B.C. It was the only time I saw Lloyd George not fully confident of his powers; and indeed he was justified, for none of his usual fire and magnetism came across. He spoke on a low dragging note, except once when mysteriously his voice leapt up, rapid and jovial . . . then presently subsided again. When he returned, asking: "How was I?" but already knowing the answer, he told us that the sudden change was the result of a card being thrust in front of him while he was at the mike, with the admonition "Too sad" written on it. He explained that he had to *see* his audience of men and women, feel their antagonism or enthusiasm, and that a little room with dead walls and an unresponsive disc was of no use to him at all. With a human audience he had a chance; he could intoxicate them by his oratory; but only if they could see as well as hear him, and if he could see and hear them respond.

And that was entirely true. The only time I had the good fortune to hear him speak in public was in 1932, at the National Liberal Club, when he had just returned from a voyage to Ceylon, following his long dangerous illness of the previous year.

All his enemies had foretold that he was finished, done for, his day was over and it were better he had not attempted this theatrical sort of resurrection. His friends did not phrase it like that, but they too were apprehensive that the fires had guttered down. Therefore friends and enemies were gathered there, but only the latter expected to triumph. Lloyd George moved slowly on to the platform with bowed shoulders, leaning heavily on the arm of his chairman. He sank down as though exhausted, even from that brief journey. When he rose to deliver his speech after the introduction, he could still hardly stand upright, his very hairs seemed limp, his eyes downcast, his voice feeble and quavering. Our hearts sank, and his opponents exchanged glances as he referred

timidly to his astonishment that they should still care to come to hear him, an old man, recently he had thought a dying man. . . . *Wily* old man! For after these first few halting sentences, he suddenly flung off his disguise and regained his potency. The effect was terrific; not only of his voice, but of his whole appearance when he sloughed his disguise as an actor throws off a cloak. Half an hour later he was still thundering on with no trace of fatigue, and friend and foe, responding with cheers and laughter and stamping their feet, were metaphorically clambering over each others' shoulders, and swinging from the staircase and gallery, signalling exultant messages to the world: "It's all right; he's in form again."

I should like to have heard Demosthenes and Burke and Disraeli and all the others. They die and are lost, and modern science can only preserve their voices, not their magnetic influence.

What a Welshman he was! We had no cowboy films on the nights when there was a programme of Welsh singers or Welsh speakers or a Welsh religious festival; he would not miss any of these. He used a Welsh shepherd's crook. He reported gleefully the success of newspapers printed in Welsh. He was never afraid of appearing in picturesque clothes, which by a lucky chance were also the most comfortable: a grey-blue suit, incredibly old, a faded green cloak draped in lavish Tennysonian folds about his broad person, and an incredibly battered greyish-green hat slouched on his brilliant silver hair. Thus attired he set out for our daily walk round the estate; little Jennifer, in her blue cloth coat and little blue velvet cap, insisted on carrying a stick too; she called him Taid, Welsh for Grandpa; he called her Cariad—darling.

A small sapling beech tree grew in the middle of his lawn: "When I planted it, I said, 'If it survives, so will The Liberal Party.'" It did survive, but has been cut down since his death.

He loved trees. In his library he stuck a branch of silver birch-tree in young leaf into a jar, and was sad when it had to be thrown away.

## CHAPTER IX History Pure and Simple

Though I admire Tennyson's poetry deeply and sincerely (nearly all of it), I have never felt any desire to be his personal friend; I can trace back this reluctance to an anecdote I read of him when I was at a tender age that took impressions easily. I told Pat the story while we were strolling under trees in the Tennysonian golden light of a summer evening, rooks by the thousand cawing above our heads. "What d'you think they're saying?" I asked as casually as possible, to catch her. But Pat was wary, and replied that they were just making rook noises. And it is quite true that when country folk call a certain bird Johnny-eat-your-cheese-up-quickly-cos-there-baint-no-more-at-home, asserting this is what that particular bird utters every time he opens his beak, I can never hear it for myself. Though (as I remarked in one of my previous volumes of autobiography) the cuckoo calls for a taxi so plainly that I cannot understand mine is the only ear to catch it, and that I have made no converts.

So now I related how Tennyson was walking in his garden one golden evening with a fervent young lady admirer, and all the birds were singing in the branches overhead; Tennyson, wrapt, I suppose, in a dark mantle, with his dark beard and dark slouch hat, was most reprehensibly quoting from his own works (as I have just done myself; a bad, immodest habit):

"Birds in the high Hall-garden  
When twilight was falling,  
Maud, Maud, Maud, Maud,  
They were crying and calling."

Interrupting her babble, he asked briskly: "*What* birds?" "Night-ingales, I suppose," replied the romantic young lady with a sweet

upward look. "Ugh," cried Tennyson, with a shudder, "what a cockney you are! Do nightingales ever call out 'Maud'? But rooks do. Listen: Maud, Maud, Maud, Maud."

—"And they do, you know, Pat. Listen. I've never heard them doing their 'Maud, Maud, Maud,' as clearly as now."

And it was exactly then, at that very moment and not before, that I remembered we were in the Isle of Wight, quite near Farringford; and these might well have been the same rooks or their descendants. One can easily imagine Tennyson had made them self-conscious and they were a bit liable to over-do their Maud stuff.

I said I liked "nearly" all of Tennyson's poetry. Certainly "The Revenge" and "An Ode on the Death of the Duke of Wellington" and "Ulysses" leap to one's mind first. And the songs from *The Princess* and *The Lady of Shalott*, and "The Lotus-Eaters," and: "The old order changeth, yielding place to new, And God fulfils Himself in many ways" . . . looted from the *Morte d'Arthur*.

Curious how many quotable lines rise in one's mind from a bad poem. Take "Locksley Hall," for instance:

In the Spring a livelier iris changes on the burnish'd dove;  
In the Spring a young man's fancy lightly turns to thoughts of love.

. . . . .

Love took up the glass of Time, and turn'd it in his glowing hands;  
Every moment, lightly shaken, ran itself in golden sands.  
Love took up the harp of Life, and smote on all the chords with  
might;  
Smote the chord of Self, that, trembling, pass'd in music out of  
sight.

. . . . .

Comfort? comfort scorn'd of devils! this is truth the poet sings,  
That a sorrow's crown of sorrow is remembering happier things.

. . . . .

For I dipt into the future, far as human eye could see,  
 Saw the Vision of the world, and all the wonder that would be;  
 Saw the heavens fill with commerce, argosies of magic sails;  
 Pilots of the purple twilight, dropping down with costly bales;  
 Heard the heavens fill with shouting, and there rain'd a ghastly  
     dew  
 From the nations' airy navies grappling in the central blue;

. . . . .

Till the war-drum throbb'd no longer, and the battle-flags were  
     furl'd  
 In the Parliament of man, the Federation of the world.  
 Eye, to which all order festers, all things here are out of joint:  
 Science moves, but slowly slowly, creeping on from point to point:  
 Slowly comes a hungry people, as a lion, creeping nigher,  
 Glares at one that nods and winks behind a slowly-dying fire.  
 Yet I doubt not thro' the ages one increasing purpose runs,  
 And the thoughts of men are widen'd with the process of the suns.

. . . . .

Not in vain the distance beacons. Forward, forward let us range,  
 Let the great world spin for ever down the ringing grooves of  
     change.  
 Thro' the shadow of the globe we sweep into the younger day:  
 Better fifty years of Europe than a cycle of Cathay.

Containing these fragments of brilliant prophecy and real understanding of man as a human being, what is wrong with "Locksley Hall" that not for one moment does it deserve to be mentioned among Tennyson's finer poems? The terrible story, of course. And the young man, the "here's me" young man who speaks it aloud, is a pain in the neck. I have always been on the side of his Cousin Amy who jilted him and was responsible for his ravings; the girl seemed to have a very good idea of the sort of husband whom one could bear to have about the place, and Cousin Locksley (I suppose that was his name) was emphatically not the man.



Is it well to wish thee happy?—having known *me*\*—to decline  
 On a range of lower feelings and a narrower heart than mine!  
 Yet it shall be: thou shalt lower to his level day by day,  
 What is fine within thee growing coarse to sympathize with clay.  
 As the husband is, the wife is: thou art mated with a clown,  
 And the grossness of his nature will have weight to drag thee  
 down.

He will hold thee, when his passion shall have spent its novel  
 force,  
 Something better than his dog, a little dearer than his horse.

Maurice Baring collected into a delectable volume called *Lost Diaries*, the private sentiments of various people of fact and fiction—Isolde of Brittany, Mark Antony, William the Conqueror, Oedipus Rex, King Cophetua; the latter proved that characters from Tennyson slip well into diary form, and inspired me to see if I could (with apologies to Maurice Baring for what must be an unworthy imitation) rightly interpret the thoughts of Cousin Amy.

Cousin Locksley has just come back. He says I've changed. He says I'm shallow-hearted. What, me shallow-hearted? I said: "What d'you want to go on saying that for, if it isn't that you're jealous?" I wish to goodness he'd never come back, but stayed among his horrid old test-tubes and his models of things that he says are going to fly one day. That's the worst of cousins. And he was the biggest namby-pamby of all of us when we were children and used to play together. Of course Daddy brought him up after Uncle was killed Charging in the Light Brigade, and there was no-one else just then, only dreary moors and the sea, and it's quite true what people say about propinkwitty. . . . So he may have swept me off my feet for a moment when he proposed to me, but he can't really pretend it was anything more than a boy-and-girl affair.

It's just his wounded vanity, to imagine I can't love my husband because he's fond of his horses and dogs; quite naturally he sleeps

\* Not italic in the original.

a bit heavily after a day's hunting, and doesn't know one end of a test-tube from another. Why, Tom and I are *ideally* married. Our tastes are so alike, we often say how funny it is! We both like hunting and going to bed early. I expect Baby's going to like hunting too. I watched Cousin Locksley's face when Tom was riding her on his foot with "This is the way the lady rides"—It was a treat; *scarlet* with trying to look contemptuous. There's one thing I *am* resolved about Baby and that is, she must be warned not to let her feelings run away with her or she may find herself married to a ranting bore like Cousin L. And I couldn't wish any daughter of mine a worse fate. How wicked I am! But honestly, he's grown *so* pompous and conceited; he actually asked how I could possibly come down to marrying Tom, after having been loved by *him*. As though Tom wasn't worth a hundred of him!

Of course he can't bear to think I've changed, so he has to—what's the new word?—rationalise the whole thing: pretend Daddy coerced me, and that it was Tom's money and all that. I shouldn't be at all surprised if he didn't go about saying Tom ill-treated me.

He was very rude to Tom at dinner last night. Tom was an angel—he took absolutely no notice. Though afterwards he said to me when we went upstairs to bed: "My dear, I'm sure your Cousin's a very clever fellow in his way, and you know I'm always very pleased for you to see your relations—but *need* we have him often?"

This Baring pastime grows on me. I must just do one more:

"O where hae ye been, Lord Randal, my son?

O where hae ye been, my handsome young man?"

"I hae been to the wild wood; mother, make my bed soon,

For I'm weary wi' hunting, and fain wald lie down."

"Where gat ye your dinner, Lord Randal, my son?

Where gat ye your dinner, my handsome young man?"

"I dined wi' my true love; mother, make my bed soon,

For I'm weary wi' hunting, and fain wald lie down."

"What gat ye to your dinner, Lord Randal, my son?  
 What gat ye to your dinner, my handsome young man?"  
 "I gat eels boiled in broo; mother, make my bed soon,  
 For I'm weary wi' hunting, and fain wald lie down."

"What became of your bloodhounds, Lord Randal, my son?  
 What became of your bloodhounds, my handsome young man?"  
 "O they swelled and they died; mother, make my bed soon,  
 For I'm weary wi' hunting, and fain wald lie down."

"O I fear ye are poisoned, Lord Randal, my son!  
 O I fear ye are poisoned, my handsome young man!"  
 "O yes! I am poisoned; mother, make my bed soon,  
 For I'm sick at the heart, and I fain wald lie down."

And Lord Randal's private point of view: Mum's a tyrant, but it's no good my pretending I'm not afraid of her. She's such a fish-wife! Damaris keeps on at me to own up boldly that we're married and to tell her that she must move out to the Dower House—she says I've got a mother fixation, whatever that may be. But Dad was just the same. . . . It's so difficult to tell Mum *anything*. Rows, rows, rows. And she's a damn' rotten housekeeper. 'Pon my halibut, I don't know what she does with her time! Damaris runs our little hunting lodge in the woods single-handed; she says Mum muddles away the whole morning interfering with the servants and stopping them from getting their work done properly and then says that if she doesn't see to everything herself! . . .

Now the other day, what do you think? I asked for my breakfast early because it was a good hunting sky, and she gave me kidney and bacon and mushrooms. I'm not grumbling at that, but something must have been kept too long (she always *will*) because it tasted queer and I felt decidedly queasy all day, and went to Dammie for a drop of brandy to settle me, and she said, "Your mother's cooking again!" and as I got worse: "Better go straight home to your own bed." Well, would you believe it? That bed of mine *hadn't been made*. Five o'clock in the afternoon and there it was; and if there's anything I do dislike in the home, it's

an unmade bed. Dad was just the same—we're not *fussy*, but it looks so *squalid* somehow, like a cheap boarding-house. I asked Mum quite nicely to make it at once, and I suppose I must have looked a bit green, because she kept on about Damaris having given me stewed eels and how they were black poison to me and that's what came of dangling after a girl like that; she couldn't give it a rest. I kept my temper at first: "Mother," I said, "please make my bed *soon*: I do feel a bit sick, it's true, and I want to lie down." But one might as well talk to a post. . . .

Damaris is right. Mum will *have* to be told. I'll do it tomorrow—today—No, today's a Friday, and tomorrow's her birthday, and Sunday, of course, is no good, and Monday Auntie Bee'll be here to dinner as usual. I'll tell her *Tuesday* that I've been married for over a year, and she can jolly well lump it.

Just one more; about Henry I. 1100–1135. I knew from William the Conqueror up to Henry I in my Kings of England table, and there memory stopped for ever. I knew also that Henry had a son called William who was drowned in the White Ship, and that his father never smiled again. Even when I was still at the period of learning from *Little Arthur's History of England*, believing, in my pretty innocence, that that was all the history there was and all the history books there were—even then I felt that the "never smile again" reaction was a little exaggerated. One has felt like that often, not only when one was seven, but when one was seventeen and twenty-seven and thirty-seven and forty-seven (and now when I am fifty-seven). Nevertheless, Henry I at his age must have realised that even if one feels like that, far better not to commit oneself aloud.

An extract from his Private Diary:

That boy has been nothing but a worry to me from the day he was born. Matilda spoilt him, that's the trouble. She was a good woman, bless her, an excellent wife, and never rubbed it in that her Uncle Edgar Atheling should have been the king instead of

me. She had the sense to see that a Norman Conquest is a Norman Conquest. And Maudie is a good little girl and a great consolation to her poor lonely father. Nobody would suppose that she and William were brother and sister. She spoke to him so sweetly the other day, poor little thing, about taking the pledge. He pulled her plaits till she cried, and told her—I forget what was the exact coarse expression, something about a judge and a pineapple.

I have to run over to Normandy next week. Perhaps I had better take William with me. He'll ill-treat the English if I leave him here on his own. If only he were fond of reading like me, one could always know he was spending his evenings curled up with a nice book, instead of having to worry about him drinking and swearing, spending money and insulting my best nobles. Nobody's ever going to call him Beauclerk like me, that's certain. Matilda, bless her, called me Beau for short. . . . "Don't be so absurd, girlie," I used to say. But one never knows; names do stick, and I shouldn't be a bit surprised if I weren't known for hundreds and hundreds of years as Henry the Beau.

The tradesmen have sent in a whole sheaf of bills that I've got to pay up for William because he's a minor. There'll be nothing left to send poor little Maudie to a finishing school. And do I get any thanks? Upon my word, there are moments when I think that boy—"Will," I said, inventing, I think, a rather pretty phrase to bring it home to him how I felt, "Will, you are bringing your father's grey hairs with sorrow to the grave." Will only laughed. "Yahl!" he said, "nothing's going to bring *you* to the grave but over-eating. How many times did you help yourself to potted lampreys last night at dinner? *I* saw yer."

### *Three weeks later.*

A most embarrassing thing has just happened. William's been drowned. All his own fault; he wouldn't return with me, but chose his own ship with a lot of hot-headed young fools like himself who spent their time abroad drinking and carousing, so of course

they didn't see where they were going and carelessly ran on to a rock. No good pretending that it isn't a relief in a good many ways. Now Maud can be the first Queen of England. Queen in her own right. The nobles may make a bit of a fuss, but I really fail to see why a woman shouldn't reign quite as well as a man, once she puts her mind to it. I must remember to write down a queer dream I had the other night about another Queen of England, not Maud at all; a very powerful woman; she gave me what-for for something I'd done or left undone. I can tell you, I woke up all of a sweat.

But to get back to Will. When I said it was embarrassing, I meant that when they came rushing up to me, pointing in all directions and flinging themselves about and beating their chests—you know how they do—Hengist and Horsa and all that Messenger lot—I expected to hear some *really* bad news. And then when they plumped out about the White Ship being lost with all aboard, I was so frightened I might look as relieved as I felt, that I put on a bit of an act and I'm afraid rather over-did it. One can't be natural if one is a king and a father; and if I'd said, "Oh, is *that* all?"—So I beat my breast a bit and rent my garments and tore my hair (not much) and ordered the messenger to be beheaded (I revoked that afterwards, of course), and vowed that I would never smile again. Everybody was most impressed. But the trouble is that now . . .

*Three weeks later.*

Damn all literal-minded people! *They think I meant it.*

*Three weeks later.*

Just had to dismiss my favourite jester on a pension. Nothing else for it. Rahere—no end of a one; always kept me in fits; one of the wittiest fellows I've ever known. "Oh, stop, *stop*," I used to groan. "*Don't* make me laugh any more; I've got a split lip." Have engaged a complete nit-wit instead. No fear I'll be tempted to laugh with him as my jester. Yesterday he actually told me that old chestnut about an old maid and a bee-sting. The whole court

burst out laughing . . . and then checked itself in a great hurry and looked at me most respectfully and began to whisper behind their hands: "Never smile again. Said he'd never smile again. Never again. Haven't seen him smile since they brought the bad news."

And just one more—it can be a short one. Let us open *Little Arthur's History of England* anywhere and see what comes up.

Prince Arthur and Hubert, in the chapter about King John; that will do, because there is a lot about it in Shakespeare too, and as I often wondered about Cousin Amy's real feelings towards her cousin, and Randal's real sentiments about his mother, and the real extent of King Henry's grief about his son William, so has it occurred to me occasionally that Hubert, though a merciful man, might yet have had a few thoughts about Little Arthur that were not for publication, not even by Shakespeare:

Had another of my headaches yesterday, one of my really bad migraines; "tic douloureux" Queen Eleanor calls it, and I shouldn't be a bit surprised. All I want when I'm like that is to lie on my bed with the room dark and be let alone. But that tiresome little boy pushed his way in and hung about me, dabbing eau de Cologne in my eyes and pestering me with his questions: "What lack you?" and "Where lies your grief?" and "What good love may I perform for you?" "Oh, for mercy's sake, run away and play," I groaned; and I hoped I'd got rid of him, because he tiptoed away. But no, back he came with a handkerchief he'd dipped in cold water and tried to tie it around my head, with a lot of babble about it being the best he had and a princess had wrought it for him. Nasty little snob. I was jumping crazy with pain, and didn't care a tinker's cuss *who* had wrought it for him. All I could think of was that awful pain just behind my eyes. Faulconbridge says I'm a hypochondriac, but what can you expect from such a bastard? I wish he had my head for half an hour, that's all.

*Three weeks later.*

What can I have done with that blasted boy's blasted handkerchief? He doesn't exactly ask for it back, but looks as though he were going to all the time, and drops remarks about the princess who did such pretty embroideries. . . . Arthur's not a *proper* boy, as his grandam says, or he wouldn't go on worrying about headaches and handkerchiefs. . . . I'm not at all sure she did wrought it. . . . It looks machine-made. That boy will drive me *mad*. All very well for his Uncle John, he doesn't have to live with him day in and day out—(I've asked for a day out over and over again). I tell you, if little Arthur had a brother and I could get 'em both into a tower and there was a couple of pillows handy, I wouldn't like to be responsible for what I'd do.

I have only just been able to pick up a copy second-hand of a revised edition of *Little Arthur's History of England*, so that as I was loth (a word the stylists will not let us use if they can help it), as I was loth to put it down, I opened it next on the story of Joan of Arc. It happened that only a few days before, I had re-read Bernard Shaw's *St. Joan* with its preface; and honestly, laying the two accounts side by side, one would think that they could not possibly be the same story about the same girl, the same Dauphin, the same French and English, or indeed, the same anything. *Little Arthur's* version:

The Maid of Orleans next persuaded the Dauphin to have the crown set on his head, and so become really the king; and as soon as that was done, a great many people came to him, and he very soon had a large army, with which his generals and Joan drove the English out of the greater part of France.

And Bernard Shaw's:

*Joan (earnestly)*: Charlie, I come from the land, and have gotten my strength working on the land; and I tell thee that the land is thine to rule righteously and keep God's peace in, and not to pledge at the pawnshop as a drunken woman pledges her children's clothes. And I come from God to tell thee to kneel in the cathedral and



solemnly give thy kingdom to Him for ever and ever, and become the greatest king in the world as His steward and His bailiff, His soldier and His servant. The very clay of France will become holy; her soldiers will be the soldiers of God: the rebel dukes will be rebels against God: the English will fall on their knees and beg thee let them return to their lawful homes in peace. Wilt be a poor little Judas, and betray me and Him that sent me?

*Charles (tempted at last):* Oh, if I only dare!

History. When we are children we learn it by quantities of little unrelated pictorial anecdotes, that adhere to memory with such obstinacy that no amount of scholarly research later on will ever quite dislodge them; small clear pictures in the bright colours of an illuminated missal, which Chesterton once called "keyholes to Heaven and Hell." In my weakness for making lists, I compiled a list of these the other day, inviting contributions from two friends who were spending the evening with me. Here is the result:

Woad, Druids, and mistletoe.

Alfred and the Cakes.

Boadicea and the bleeding rods.

Phoenicians (tin and indigo dyes).

Winged hats and beaked ships.

Harold and Senlac and the arrow.

William Rufus and the other arrow.

Fair Rosamund and the Maze.

Henry II doing penance for Becket.

King John at Runnymede. Simon de Montfort.

Bruce and the spider.

Wallace—"Scots wha hae wi . . ."

"Let the boy win his spurs," and that disgraceful exhibitionist the Black Prince on a pony, with the king of France, mounted on a big white horse, riding captive beside him.

Richard II and Wat Tyler.

York and Lancaster roses, and a sort of Kingmaker.

Queen Philippa and the Burghers of Calais. }  
 Queen Eleanor who sucked the poison from } Interchangeable.  
 somebody's wound. }

Henry VIII had six wives.

Princes in the Tower, bobbed hair, black velvet tunics and tights, smothered by wicked uncle. Babes in the Wood.

Elizabeth on a white horse. Raleigh and the cloak. Drake and the Armada; beacons; we won. She never married (?).

Mary Queen of Scots. Pearls. Rizzio, and being beheaded. And Hollywood (*no, dear, Holyrood*).

Edward VI and Lady Jane Grey, very clever and pale; studied Latin.

Charles II and the oak-tree and the Orange Girl. And being an awful long time a-dying.

Cromwell: "Take away this Bauble."

Nelson's "Kiss me, Hardy." Trafalgar. We won.

"Up guards and at 'em" on my pencil-box. We won.

Victoria: "I will be good," and her Accession in a shawl and nightgown.

"Angels not Angles" (alternatively, "Angles not Angels").

Perkin Warbeck and Lambert Simnel who became a scullion. And a cake.

Llewellyn and Bedgelert.

Butt of Malmsey that Clarence was drowned in.

A king who died of a surfeit of palfreys, or was it peaches, dipped in the Wash?

"When did you last see your father?" "Now let me see. . . . Don't *hurry* me. . . . I can only think properly when I'm not hurried. Was it Thursday? No, wait a moment, I'm wrong; I did see him Thursday, but he was sober; and I saw him again afterwards when he was carrying on in an awfully silly way, and tried to walk straight through a picture—yes, that picture over there."

Field of the Cloth of Gold.

And we neither knew nor cared what these historical people did in the intervals, when they were not doing or saying these things.

The Field of the Cloth of Gold, vague and splendid, figured in that portion of history when Henry VIII was on the throne of England, Charles V on the throne of Spain, and Francis I on the throne of France. It was always a little surprising, at our *Little Arthur's* period of childhood, when we were taken for even a brief excursion across the Channel to any other history which was not English pure and simple (insular little beasts, but our teachers were to blame as well!). Later I learnt that Charles V was nephew-in-law to Henry VIII, and that Cardinal Wolsey craftily used the antagonism between Spain and France to make England arbiter between them; so that must have been when all those yards of expensive gold cloth were measured out and shipped across to decorate the conference with an illusion of grandeur and glory that our conferences nowadays most soberly lack. Among other ostentatious gestures to impress his nephew-in-law, Henry sent him a gift of four hundred of his noble breed of mastiffs: "Don't thank me, dear boy; I can easily spare them; plenty more at home."

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## CHAPTER X    You Can't See the Wood for the Trees

Mighty authors of the Victorian era, Meredith and Dickens and Trollope, might have improvised several pages apostrophising disillusion in great sensuous chunks of unparagraphed writing. Nowadays, however, the fashion has gone out; and much though I could say on the subject ("Ah, disillusion, whom wantonly in youth we pursue," and so forth), sentimental moralising were better kept on a strong leash.

The years following the war are fruitful soil for bitter apples; and while I was honestly trying to overcome a desire to hand them round and share them (during the war spreading "alarm and despondency" was quite rightly a punishable offence), I received a review of one of my books which referred scornfully to "my uneventful life." I had hoped I was not unduly sensitive ever since I reacted with genuine enjoyment to a Midwestern journalist reporting one of my lectures: "She's the homeliest woman you ever saw—" it began. And "homely" in that American idiom does not stand for "addicted to hearth and home"; it means right-down plain. I was certainly at first a mite astonished, for though no Helen of Troy, I had placed myself (whenever I thought of it) about halfway down the list between Helen and the *homeliest* woman you ever saw. . . . However, the paragraph went on to say: "But she has such charm, you forget her looks directly she begins to speak." Let us reverse insult and compliment, and then ponder on whether or not I would have preferred: "She has less charm than anyone I've ever met, but she's so beautiful that you forget her lack of charm directly you look at her."

And another American reviewer who began his column with the sentence: "It is difficult to believe, but G. B. Stern has written a good novel," woke a real tenderness in my breast—something so ingenuous about "It is difficult to believe." . . . But the critic of my "uneventful life" left me at first quite stunned by the contemptuous way in which he twiddled my very existence on its stem and then chucked it on the rubbish heap. Had I really suffered from delusions about my "uneventful" life? Had I really lived all this while like a minor character in Jane Austen, or like the wistful old Provençal in the refrain: "Je n'ai jamais vu Carcassonne"? These fifty odd years which I had imagined so crowded and coloured with experiences, were they after all, compared with this reviewer's standards, just humdrum years? I mused on "humdrum," attempting to define it, until the visual adhesions broke, and I saw it as two exciting words jammed together to compose its opposite meaning: Let's make things hum! How the beat of the drum stirs the blood. . . .

During my humdrum life I have been in the California earthquake in 1933, where thousands of lives were lost; I have to a certain extent participated in two world wars, for even non-combatants living in England, and mostly in London, from 1914 to 1918 and from 1939 to 1944, were not totally removed as though they were on a blue-lagoon island; I have had four major operations, three of them in 1940 during the air-raid period; I have been up in an aeroplane (yes, dear, so have millions of other people, but the *first* time up is, nevertheless, for one of my generation, quite an event); I have stood alone on a platform, while audiences of six or seven hundred waited confidently for me to take them "out of themselves" by my sole effort. I have kept myself—and others—since I was twenty, by a precarious and unsteady profession, a one-man job which also must mean certain moments of penniless, blank despair; I have heard on the telephone that my home and everything in it had been consumed by an incendiary bomb. All this material for autobiography is far from being unique or phenomenal; I should be a fool to claim

any special respect on that score; but what with one thing and another, too personal to state in black and white, I have had enough to say now, with a sincere appeal to the future, "*Anything for a quiet life!*" Meaning not a quiet stream (we have already gone into that); not a life without bird-song, or the crunch and suck of cold waves on pebbles, or the sougning of the wind in the willows; but a quiet life when the days ahead will look free from potential good or evil.

Still apostrophising that reviewer whose life, unlike mine, is presumably *not* uneventful, I assure him that I have sometimes (not always) longed for that jog-trot rhythm which he has strangely read into a volume of my autobiography; for indeed one feels desperately that there is no such thing as a quiet life when still each separate day, unlocking from the rest, can bring news by letter, telephone, cable, telegram, and word of mouth, of birth, of illness, and of sudden death in one's immediate circle; of accident and domestic disruption; of the unlooked-for arrival or departure of a close friend into another continent, a friend who matters; a day that might bring success or its opposite; keen disappointment; a new and brilliant idea or a savage criticism; a day that can bring a gift or a robbery or a loss by quarrel or some casual encounter that will change the whole of your life, or the publication of a new Government Order that will certainly change it. We may reach Heaven and find there a quiet life; but which of us can claim to distinguish without effrontery between eventful and uneventful, when all events loom so big and should be accepted as so pitifully small?

I believe now that when we say "*Anything for a quiet life,*" we mean "*anything for a safe life.*" And safety is a fairy-tale. Years ago, before the last two wars, before life on the five continents became precarious, two small incidents suddenly made me feel . . . insecure. The first thing was falling down on the threshold of my own home for no apparent reason, for I did not feel faint, nor trip, nor turn my ankle—I just fell down; so who could guard against that happening at any

moment of any day? And the second thing happened in the cloakroom of a well-known West End restaurant, when the decorous attendant burst into a torrent of invective against a client, innocent and astonished at this undeserved persecution. It might just as easily have been directed against myself, for there was obviously nothing to account for it; the woman was not even drunk; she was having a brain-storm, an unreasonable lapse from sanity.

When I was a child, I was always afraid of walking on one of those cellar flaps that break the rhythm of the pavement, for fear it should give way and let me through and down and under—a fear parallel to all those queer little unforeseen traps and perils and fissures; equivalent, psychology would tell us, to the attacks of amnesia by which the sick mind, dashing here and there, at last finds its literal escape in a total black-out of memory.

“ . . . last seen leaving a tobacconist’s shop in Commercial Road, wearing a fawn raincoat.” (Sophia once remarked that people always lost their memories in a fawn raincoat!)

We long for some invisible sanctuary just beyond a small gate . . . that I visualise for some peculiar reason as green and set in a wall. A green gate or door set in a wall cannot help appearing significant, though beyond must be faith and guess-work; through iron scrolls or wooden lattice we are given some hint of a lacy pattern of trees, no more. Hanging in my bedroom, where I can see it on waking, is a picture by Victor Askeu called *A Courtyard in Chester*, which must have attracted me not only because of its bold authoritative treatment, but also because of its subject. (Presently I shall be reporting a wrathful argument which goes on from year to year between myself and the art connoisseur, Duncan Macdonald, on this tricky question of whether the *subject* of a painting is of the slightest importance.) In Askeu’s picture the sun slants quietly, not brilliantly, across the upper half of a green gate; there is a suggestion of trees and brown walls and barns; on the yard’s

paving not even a pigeon is to be seen, yet I could have sworn (had I not just gone into my room for a closer scrutiny) that at least one bird split its cooing note on the afternoon silence.

Quietness is what I need in any picture; not dead quiet, but a suggestion to keep imagination lightly on the *qui vive* (translated in the dictionary as "Who goes there?" which faithfully serves my purpose; "Tocsin and trumpeter, who goes there?") Beyond the green door, is a garden, and just outside the courtyard's frame a pigeon. All of these spell, not too definitely, escape.

But I have not yet told you about the bench or the footbridge. *The Footbridge*, by H. C. Lowry, is a simple indication, black and white and grey, mostly in outline, that in an anonymous industrial town you go up some steps, and cross over an anonymous street, and probably down some more steps on the further side, only these we cannot see; nor can we see the street, nor any figure using the footbridge; so why such a painting should cause our blood to tingle and set curiosity on fire, I cannot pretend to explain. By the same mystery, whenever I see in another picture (belonging to a friend) that empty bench placed on high ground commanding an undefined prospect, I am compelled to wonder even with passion *what* sort of a view one might get, sitting there? The unknown painter does not answer that question. And maybe I am a fool to value a bench, a gate, a footbridge, merely for its tantalising quality.

I cannot help noticing how most people, however wealthy they may be, are either stricken into silence and respect, or on the contrary, break into harsh condemnation of wanton extravagance in others, on hearing that I actually *buy* pictures (on the rare occasions when I imagine I have had a windfall), instead of going to look at them in national galleries or in Burlington House. "*How* does one buy a picture?" they ask, strangely helpless when faced with this normal proceeding, as though one required dockets or a visa or a special certificate. That is the school to which I myself belonged, once upon a time, the "how-does-one-buy-a-picture" school; so I can sympathise with them rather more than with the



harsher sort who appear to look on picture-buying as one of the submerged vices: "My dear, I've never done such a thing in my life—I couldn't afford it," without reference to the things they can and do afford. Yet if you really tackle this reproachful attitude, you run straight into an almost universal delusion that it is impossible to pay less than £4,000 for any original painting. You point out one on which you have risked, say, £15, backing your fancy for a young outsider who has not yet made her name, and only £40 for that one over there by an artist who is already famous enough to charge £80 or more, only it happens that you got it before his prices shot up. Nevertheless, they still say they could not afford it . . . for a picture.

Is there something faintly discreditable about private ownership of pictures?

To my own surprise, I bought a still life a few months ago. I never thought I should; even the great masters could not reconcile me to an odd selection of fish and poultry in conjunction, perhaps, with a jug of water and a pair of gloves (and never forget the dead hare; not only dead, but died recently). Nevertheless, this example of still life by Winifred Nicholson has the same haunting quality as the bench and the footbridge and the door in the wall and the courtyard. The point of the picture, a jug of flowers standing in the foreground on the sill in front of a wide-open window, though engaging and lively in treatment, need not have carried imagination any further, even though a little lemon moon hung, a small crescent, in the misty sky. Yet a light wind was getting up that might presently blow away the mist, for the muslin window-curtains were billowing out towards the low hills . . . only you cannot be sure of the mist on the hills or, indeed, of the pale curtains stirring, shifting, disappearing as we look; only the jug and flowers are tangible.

At least, I vowed, I would never buy an allegorical picture. This does not apply to any religious picture, where mystery is clarified by symbols that express even more clearly than their own meaning, the painter's naïf adoration for his subject. In Crivelli's

picture of the Annunciation, a slender golden rod slants down from the Dove in Heaven, through the wall of a house in a little Italian town, till it rests upon a kneeling girl, virginal, awe-struck. What touches the very spring of tears in Crivelli's conception is when we perceive a neat little heart-shaped aperture pierced through the outer wall of the house, courteously prepared for the Holy Shaft to pass through without encountering what might otherwise have been an obstruction. But allegorical pictures are different, with allegorical figures in them heavily doing their stuff. I suffered from a terribly youthful adoration of G. F. Watts and his *Love of Life*, with Life as a half-wit girl, ever so thin, and Love a male with great brooding wings, guiding her steps up the Rocks; I do not know what Rocks, but they must have been part of an impenetrable allegory.

All the same, had it not cost £150, I should have bought an enormous allegorical canvas in a moment of half-madness, about three years ago. One should not commit irrevocable acts in any moment of half-madness, but this must have been lunacy on a striking scale, to contain and conquer all my prejudices: for the picture was huge, it was in the difficult modern idiom of painting, it was religious; it embodied a lesson; it was called *The Lifeboat*.

And it was lovely.

The curve of one huge wave, lifted to support on its crest a lifeboat, which instead of yielding to the action of the wave, had surmounted and conquered it, and was facing boldly in an opposite direction. The small crew who manned the boat had no distinct personalities; the feathery wings of light which spread from them all over the upper sky were comment enough on their nature; in the hollow below the wave, dim desperate figures spread dark wings, wings that dragged and sank. Really, put into descriptive sentences, you must agree it sounds like the sort of picture that as a perpetual inmate of one's home, could serve only as a perpetual punishment for one's idea of ever possessing a picture at all. Yet I wanted it. I still want it. And I must believe I was *compos mentis* at the time, for others who had seen it felt the

same extraordinary compulsion. It was like a powerful argument for true religion which somehow had got itself onto canvas, into a frame, on the wall of a gallery. Certainly it would have been interesting to have seen its effect (had I bought it and hung it Heaven knows where) on friends who had not previously been warned; on those who were knowledgeable, and on those who just "knew what they liked." I wonder, for instance, what verdict Duncan (eminent in the former class) would have pronounced? Duncan maintains, steadily, humorously or irascibly, according to his health and my fluctuating state of popularity with him, that the actual subject of a picture could not matter less. The treatment, the artist's vision of urgency, more mysterious than the layman's plain choice of what spells beauty, the artist's craft in the use of his paints, those, he says, are all that matter. *My* argument, pugnaciously maintained against odds, does not, of course, advocate any return to the period of every-picture-tells-a-story, when crowds used to collect in front of John Collier's Academy hit *The Cheat*, to discuss excitedly *which* was the cheat? Was it the woman still sitting at the bridge-table, or the woman standing up and either accusing her or dramatically defending herself? But a picture's necessary subject is not necessarily the same as a picture's unnecessary story, and why must Duncan pretend to confuse the two? And why may I not have preferences in subject, liking this more, caring for that less, after granting that the two artists were equally good in their arrangement and handling? I own a picture of the corner of a bedroom, which is a delight to me for its pattern and colouring; but the same artist with equal mastery had painted some haycocks in a field, and I should have slightly preferred to own that, because, dear Duncan, I would rather look at haycocks in the sunshine than at quilts falling off a double bed. Surely that is a final statement of my point, though you yourself, years ago, showed me several Renoirs, your favourite painter, and indeed I agree with you that he was the greatest of the French Impressionists; yet even among the Renoirs I kept on disgracing myself by saying I would rather

you gave me *this* one than *that* one (not that the question seriously had to be settled), because sitting on the ground in a wood is a girl in a pink hat and a striped pink and white dress. . . . But a few minutes later you showed me a naked girl holding back her hair as she bends over a deep pool. As both were illuminated by Renoir's genius, I preferred as subject the arrangement *without the pink hat*. My word, you were cross! Nor could you then foresee your argument triumphant, four years later. I have not told you yet. I am going to tell you now:

I bought a beautiful picture, one of the most beautiful pictures I have ever seen. The subject was frankly romantic. It was not exactly of a ruined castle on a hill above the sea and the sun just setting, but as I do not want it to be identified, this is near enough. I saw it hanging in a Gallery, and it gave me that queer strong desire, which most of us have experienced, somehow to identify myself more closely with this lump of sheer loveliness. . . . One feels it sometimes, for instance, over a field clotted with cowslips, or a wood of bluebells: picking is not enough; rolling in them would not be enough, either. John invented a test which he put to himself over pictures: Do I want to write a story about this? Gladys and I are liable to test our reactions on a much lower level: Do I want to eat it? I *did* want to eat the picture which, in a sort of ecstasy of possession, I hung on my bedroom wall, but I should not have wanted to write a story about it . . . as I might have written a story to share with you the green door in the courtyard, or the empty bench looking out over a view that one could not see, or the baffling excitement of the footbridge. My new treasure was complete in itself; it was all there, offering itself freely, nothing potential about it, nothing left for guessing or wondering, nothing provocative or queerly disturbing: it was safe and it was static. A picture like that might dawdle through its sunset for ever, because I was seized with no impulse to plead passionately for just that one moment to be arrested and never pass away.

Nearly everyone to whom I showed my picture (without as yet

the slightest qualm) echoed my enthusiasm and congratulated me on the purchase. And let there be no mistake about this; the painting itself was exceptionally skilful; the artist had shown uncanny success in the way he reproduced the crumbling stained walls of the castle. So I cannot tell at what stage I began to feel the first faint uneasy twitch of mistrust. Perhaps it was when once accidentally and a little too quickly I happened to turn to the other picture on the wall behind me, *The Courtyard in Chester*, not nearly so enchanting, not bathed and drenched in loveliness. And yet . . . and yet . . . And the next thing was when Gladys, an artist herself, did exactly the same, and added to her renewed praises of the castle: "But you know, that courtyard's *the* one, really; you *do* know, of course you do; we both know!" And next, when Rebecca, who buys pictures herself and has the same outlook as mine, added to *her* hymnal of admiration for the ruined castle, a spontaneous, unwounding remark: "I've never seen why one shouldn't have second-rate pictures on the wall. They're *pretty*; they give one pleasure to look at—when they're well painted, of course." Yes, but the word I remembered, out of all that, was "second-rate."

And then I became aware (this is the slow history of the deterioration of a love-affair) of being glad that I had hung the picture in my bedroom and not in the sitting-room, just in case Duncan Macdonald dropped in. I did not (somehow) want Duncan to see it, although it was such a beautiful, beautiful picture.

And then I heard that a friend of a friend had acquired two pictures by the same artist of the same castle, only from slightly different aspects. The answer to my vexation on being told this should undoubtedly be that had I ever been able to acquire a Utrillo showing any street in a Paris suburb with a few white houses and some shops with their signs, "Lingerie," "Charcuterie," "Au Petit Bonhomme," I would not have minded if twenty other people possessed Utrillos of exactly the same street with barely a sign changed.

So . . . something was wrong. And uneasiness did not dis-

perse; the feeling grew that I had let myself down, or at least let down the rest of my pictures by adding this one prominently and proudly to the collection.

And finally Pat came to stay with me, and summed it up in a phrase, so that there was no longer any room for delusion: She said (and like all the others, not to disparage but in genuine admiration): "It reminds one of a Walt Disney Silly Symphony."

Target shot. From that moment the ruined castle, with its crumbling walls on a hill over the sea, the rosy reflections, the sunset and the sky, most undoubtedly was and remained a Walt Disney of the Best Period: *Fantasia*, the Silly Symphonies, "Wynken, Blynken, and Nod" . . . moments when one could hardly believe one was looking with mortal eyes on a scene quite so luscious in colour, so fairy-like in conception. I was all unworthy to own that picture . . . and I took it back to the Gallery and swopped it for two others by younger and more inexperienced painters: one of a stretch of sands at an English seaside; the other, a Paris boulevard drenched in a shower of spring rain. I should not mind letting Duncan Macdonald see either of them; even if his judgment went against mine, I still should not mind; but I was infinitely relieved at the departure of the ruined castle from my wall.

So I imagine that the whole incident was a distinct score to his argument that the subject of a picture does not matter. Not that I think romantic subjects are barred, but here Socrates (Was it Socrates?) might ask: "It depends upon what you mean by 'romantic'?" There will always be beautiful ruined castles for us to look at, whether they are painted once or twice or fifty times; no need here for thanksgiving; all the artist did for us was to use his craft in transferring them to canvas. But the green door and the empty bench and the footbridge are exciting and significant, and therefore romantic for less obvious reasons: We might not have encountered them; they might never have entered into our living consciousness; but they did, thanks to the painter who

translated them into terms that could secure their transient quality. In fact, romantic subjects are not barred; only romantic clichés of universal appeal.

The moment has now come to tell you about *Reveille*, which is not my property, though how I wish it were! It belongs to the proprietor of the Waddington Galleries in Dublin; Jack Yeats is the artist. On first looking at it, you are aware of nothing but thick swirls of paint, a black, stormy night-sky; on the lake, a small sail just touched with fire as it leans towards the red dawn cracking in thin streaks behind a landscape so turbulent that as you stare at it and, gradually, certain features emerge, you wonder if you can be seeing aright: Rearing at the edge of the water—can it actually be a stallion, gaily caparisoned? And is that a wheel of a circus wagon not far off? Can the horse have rushed out from the circus at the first crimson signal that night was over, on some wild fantastic errand of his own? And suddenly, between the wagon and the horse, you are aware of the brilliant focusing point: a slender boy, nearly naked, sounds his lifted trumpet towards the daybreak. The moment is caught and exultantly held in movement. Had I seen *Reveille* first, I could not have bought the romantic castle; and unlike the castle, *Reveille* could never be painted twice over.

When I saw it, I was on my first visit to Ireland; I had expected to find the Irish consciously charming and picturesque. But I was wrong; Swords, for instance, a village near Dublin, had not been so named in order that I, a stranger, should be thrilled by it; it had been called Swords since the days of Brian Boru; and when the old driver of the car taking us through the Wicklow Hills remarked: "Carrying peat is a slavish job," he can have had no idea that I made a note of the perfect adjective. He was serenely informative, pointing out memorials in Dublin and everywhere else; but when we asked "In memory of whom?" he neither knew nor thought it mattered. It was just a memorial. I did not know that once there had been gold-mines in the Wicklow Hills till I

came across a picture in the bar of an inn where I was given nearly my worst meal for about twenty years. The little active figures hard at work digging, wheeling barrows of gold, and simultaneously weighing and selling the nuggets, were obviously making such a good thing out of it that I was surprised that the industry had been abandoned.

At a small seaside place, a swaggering poster advertised "The Albino Palmist." Odd that "Albino" should have been thought an alluring qualification, worthy of mention in a fortune-teller. The word-power of "Albino" may be audible to others and not to me; as others in turn may not respond as I do to the ancient potency of "Swords" or "Philadelphia" or "Châteauneuf du Pape" or "Glencorse," and their oral value as place-names. Sometimes, however, the difference in language slays this potency. Do we not have to remind ourselves perpetually, unless we are Anglo-Saxon scholars, that the Gospels were "glad tidings" indeed?

When we hear a Hollywood company of actors in a translated French film, talk in American voices, we declare it's absurd to expect us to accept them as French people in France, but if they talked English as we talk it over here, we should be quite willing to accept a perfectly sensible illusion; and oddly, still more likely to accept it, when they talk English with a strong French accent; a preposterous formula. Obviously no real French people would converse with each other in broken English when going about their daily business. I could not help meditating on this when I recently saw a new and notable actor, Chaplin by name, make a magnificent first appearance as a quiet little French murderer in the sinister film *Monsieur Verdoux*. The English nature is conservative and a bit stubborn; they mourned for Charlie and would restrict him for ever from becoming Charles.

"Restriction" is a word which conveys panic narrowing to claustrophobia, mentally and physically; a pity it was ever used by any government, for it could persuade none to collaborate, but on the contrary, only induce a frantic desire to burst it open and escape; not from rebellious motives, but because it is one of



these official pronouncements without yield or depth or compassion.

I found "compassion" in the headline of a typed note which I should like to reproduce exactly as it stands, hoping that someone perhaps may be able to tell me what I originally meant by it? I can assist them by a couple of footnotes: (a) the remark quoted was made by my friend Humphrey, who with his wife Rosemary had lived on the next headland to ours above the Italian Mediterranean over twenty years ago, and shared our wine-tour through France. I have tasted the fruit he speaks of: neither plum nor greengage nor peach nor litchi nor passion-fruit, but with the flavours of all these, divinely blended. (b) *Love in an Igloo* I recommended to myself as a good title for a story unknown. With all the will in the world, I cannot link it with either Stefan Zweig or Dr. Johnson. Perhaps, however, the link is "Utopia"? *Love in an Igloo might be Utopian.* . . .

COMPASSION - STEFAN ZWEIG  
 23 Motley 912 (3) X  
 FOOD  
 Personal  
 "But did he not care what he put into his belly? (see Dr. Johnson) "He does not even mention Feijoa Sellowiana, the fruit Winter gave up and which I planted at "Cavo". And that I regard as an intellectual fruit and one to make a philosopher think more potently of Utopia.  
 Humphrey  
 COMMENT: as is? ~~But~~  
 LOVE IN AN IGLOO  
 - U.S. Stat  
 Cavo, not  
 Cairo?  
 Cairo?

I once had a queer dream, long after my mother died, in which I heard her boasting to a gardener of bygone glories, and how the terraces were now in ruins at the chalet which used to be our

home. She said "châlet" and I heard "châlet," but in my dream the word clearly stood for "château," and I was ashamed of her snobbery and loyally determined not to tell anyone about it, for we never *had* lived in a château (nor, indeed, in a châlet). An odd jumble in my mind of grand and humble dwellings; proving that directly they are loosened and pushed about in a dream, words are counters too unreliable to be trusted.

I made a note of this dream when it happened, and have reproduced it now in the blind belief that I did dream it, for I have not the slightest remembrance of any part; so it must take its place with *Love in an Igloo*, gems that would have been lost to the world had I not written them down at the time.

As amnesia appears to be overwhelming my past, as an incoming tide swamps all our little sand-castles and sand-pictures, I assembled a whole collection of these nearly forgotten notes under the heading: "Three hundred and sixty-five Profound Reflections on Character and Human Nature, with Sketches and Examples." But I did not publish them in any proper order, for such wisdom can acknowledge no order. . . .

Captain H—'s touching idea that people drink too much in the hope of making themselves better loved.

When Margaret moved from her house in the country to her London flat, she arranged to do it all in one day, and sleep in the flat that same night. The man who fetched the furniture in a much too small van, was apparently obsessed in fitting the different pieces into beautiful patterns; and by this formula of what was and was not important, took along the Encyclopedia in preference to her daughter's bed. It was discovered afterwards that he had once been a worker in mosaics.

Of the General at a first meeting: I was incredulously delighted that anyone so tall and splendid, with such a triumphant scarlet lining to his coat, should also have been so easy of access, so

friendly and intimate. Yet it proved *too* easy; like the kind of drawer that never sticks or jerks, but slides towards you with hardly a pull . . . and then the whole of it comes out and spills its contents, which is disconcerting. I came to the conclusion that I like reserve in generals, though not in a chest-of-drawers.

A character I know: "With little indulgent laughs distributed impartially so that everybody should have one."

The terrifying implication of "We didn't tell you at the time." What might be going on *now* which later on will turn out to be "at the time" that they're not telling us of?

Types: The only-half-way-there-girl, not all there; parallel with the get-away-with-murder girl.

Remark overheard: "You couldn't *possibly* marry a man called Ferdinand. . . . Ferdinand was a *bull*!"

Title for short story: "In Praise of Solitude."

Old rhyme describing a certain lady's clothing:

Something old and something new,  
Something bogus and something blue.

Advice to an author of the Split-Hair School: It's no good elaborating for readers who don't get it otherwise, as they're probably the readers who won't get it anyway.

Type: Her way of having an opinion of her own: She does not lay it down beside yours on the table so that you can compare them; she slams it down on top of yours, always with the certainty that here is the ace to your knave and it takes the trick with game and rubber to her.

On the theme of "Well, we can't all enjoy the same thing, can we?"

*Me* (on the telephone to Tiger): Panther's in America still.

She's been sent to cover the big lynching trial.

*Tiger* (in genuine congratulation on a friend's happiness):

Oh, Peter, how *nice*!

But should Sophia have laughed so heartily on discovering I had dropped a florin into the slit of a collecting-box in her spare bedroom, labelled "For the Sailor's Society"? The box had simply been left there empty, no longer required for active collection, and had no real need of my impetuous offering, which, she informed me with a gay "Never mind," could not now be retrieved. I supplied her with a cynical title for this incident—"Charity Begins at Home," but she retorted with a better one—"Had for a Mug."

Human nature not at its very nicest: A newly engaged couple, or recently married and happy, nearly always make a parade of their happiness in a hundred small but ostentatious ways in front of a third and preferably solitary person (who will certainly have to be continually smothering envy). This is subconscious sadism, not quite as cruel as it sounds: they have a compulsion to impress it on themselves that they are now safe and respectable and sheltered from loneliness; and the best way to reassure themselves on this point is to display it by every device to someone still in need of this happiness . . . who may be relied upon to pick up the idea more quickly and sensitively than, for instance, another couple.

A good lady aged eighty, one of the Elect, in the spring of 1940 wrote to her son, a major in the army, that the Second Coming was obviously close at hand, and any minute now he might expect that some people (herself among them) would

quite simply vanish and not be seen again; so when it happened, would he and his wife please go down at once to her house in Wiltshire to look after the silver. The old lady's mental process was a little puzzling; taking it for granted that neither her son nor daughter-in-law could possibly be, like herself, a candidate certain to be nominated for Heaven, did she want to make sure they had the silver to console them on earth? Or was she merely reacting automatically to the convention in which she had been brought up, that you did not suddenly leave your home without delegating someone to make sure that the spoons were all right?

Comment on Disney's *Snow White* (and indeed on most of the old fairy-tales): They give you a little girl as heroine whom you mentally place at the age of nine or ten, and quite suddenly she marries the prince. Had this anything to do with the period when children did marry? Theme in *The Oak Staircase* and *A Chaplet of Pearls* which in my nursery days had left me utterly incredulous: "But then I could marry, now, at once!"

From our "There's-a-tendency-nowadays" column: I'm inclined to think that when youth craves for change, and says it is only the aging and old who want peace and a quiet life, they mean, quite naturally, that they want a change into active fun and adventure from the grey restrictions of the present period; and furthermore, by "adventure" they mean gay attractive adventure, not new experiences even more unendurable. The difference being that we who are older realise that "a change," without any specific adjective qualifying it and swerving it into the right direction, may (even on a generous basis of reasoning) turn out to be a change for the worse. And if our life at the moment happens by unlikely good fortune to have halted not right on the side of an erupting volcano, but at a village far enough off from the sudden rumble and showers of hot lava, it is there that every day we should like to repeat the gentle mediocrity of the day before; kind days with a regular rhythm; not empty, not dull, but

on a pleasant routine; days that we can *trust*. As for change, as for excitement—thanks, we've had it!

Seen on a tombstone in the aisle at Dorchester Abbey:

Reader! If thou hast a Heart fam'd for Tenderness and Pity, Contemplate this Spot. In which are deposited the remains of a Young Lady, whose artless Beauty, Innocence of Mind, and gentle Manners, once obtained her the Love and Esteem of all who knew her. But when Nerves were too delicately spun to bear the rude Shakes and Jostlings which we meet with in this transitory World, Nature gave way: She sunk and died a Martyr to Excessive Sensibility.

*Punch* on Excessive Sensibility: Lay-out of blasted oak and gibbous moon; a pleasing presentment of a witch over a cauldron, addressing what was presumably another witch, her friend, now a toad crouching in a puddle of cloak and tall pointed hat:

"Eva, my dear, *what* have I said that's upset you?"

It's a funny thing about me (there are lots of funny things about me), but I too am a martyr to excessive sensibility in my fury at all practical joking. I was recently told of a man who was informed he had won the Christmas turkey in a club raffle, and happened not to have been present for the draw; so his mates hid it and cleverly simulated a false turkey stuffed with sand, with a real head tied on. He called for his prize, took it away, and they waited in vain for his indignant return. The next time they all saw him, he said the turkey had tasted "fine." Bewildered, they questioned him further; and with some embarrassment he admitted he had forgotten all about having had a chance in the raffle, and had already bought a turkey which was ready to eat at home; and on his way back in the train, with his prize on the rack, a stranger in the same carriage had admired it and said *he* had not been able to get hold of one for Christmas; so our man, having two, had sold him his "prize turkey" then and there for £3: they had parted at the station, the second man delighted at how pleased his missus would be at this eleventh-hour trophy. Natu-

rally he had given no name or address, therefore he could not be traced to let him have the real lottery turkey, which was now handed over to the lucky winner amid roars of laughter from his mates . . . whose mirth redoubled as they visualised the dismay of the fellow who had paid over £3, only to have taken home to his missus a parcel of sand for their Christmas dinner!

I had always accepted the "practical" joke as expressing a form of humour I vehemently dislike, without examining this rather peculiar adjective. "Practical" meant to me whoever in the household can do what I cannot do myself, without puzzling and fumbling and bungling. "So-and-so is the practical one"—And, with a sigh of relief, the practical one can be left to discover what has gone wrong with the electric iron? What is the best silk shop where elastic can be bought? How to get hold of and prepare for the sweep, and which sweep is "our" sweep? And so on, down an endless range of daily difficulties almost insurmountable, except of course to the practical one, who can also fathom points and rations and coupons, P.A.Y.E., insurance and registration, double and single summer-time and no summer-time at all; what's wrong with the cat's ear; how to bandage in emergencies; fires and the vacuum-cleaner; mending fuses, retrieving and sewing on buttons as they fall; elementary gardening and elementary dress-making; elementary nursing and vetting; hanging the curtains again after they have been cleaned and what will take out that stain; and "I'll get so-and-so to come round and look at the pump"; and "You stay in bed till I've taken your temperature"—The "practical one" as opposed to the "dreamy one," the "delicate one," the "artistic one," the "athletic one." But a "practical" joke? I tried murmuring over to myself the "dreamy joke," the "delicate joke," the "artistic joke," the "athletic joke." Yes, they are all just possible; a dreamy joke might be rendered absent-mindedly, and be all the funnier; the delicate joke is subtle, not everyone can perceive its delight; the artistic joke is inclined to be a little too

elaborate; and of course the athletic joke is just detestable, requiring great physical endurance on the part of the victim. I view it as hand in glove with the practical joke, which in dictionary terms must mean a joke carried out in practice and not left to theory; a joke which works; a basin of water poised on the door so that it falls well and truly on your head, differing slightly from the letter which plausibly announces you have been left a fortune when you haven't, or that a policeman is on the doorstep with a warrant for your arrest when he isn't; these are not quite so practical, and have a special day of a special month allotted to them. *April fool!* A fool, a fool, I met a fool i' the forest. . . . There are some who wander about the forest for twelve months of every year in quest of a fool on whom they may play their cruel jokes. It's a funny thing about me, but I would gladly sentence the practical joker to penal servitude for life. But the practical one of the family, how different that is! To them I go humbly as Kipling's Hubshee, my shoes in my hand; to them I say "Please" several times: "Please will you explain whether I have to put my watch back or forward at two o'clock tomorrow morning for double summer-time?" "Listen, dear," they reply patiently (because I had asked them exactly the same last year), "I'll tell you once and for all how it works. And then you'll know, won't you?"

(Oh, yeah? and Sez you!)

I still do *not* know whether to add or subtract, and whether that gives me an hour or two hours more or less of sleep and at which end, and how it affects the daylight ("After all, we've got to remember it's really two hours later—or earlier"), or which way the cows are seriously displeased. They tell me I have not tried, but indeed I have. They tell me to use my sense, but indeed I do; it must be sense of poor and threadbare quality. These people who can slip the hours on and off like beads from a string, serenely confident that all through England other serenely confident people are doing exactly the same and not the contrary thing,



did they love as much as I did the cartoon which appeared in an evening paper during the most bitter spell of winter weather in March, 1947? A figure beating his way up the mountain:

He bore aloft through snow and ice  
A banner with a strange device—  
DOUBLE SUMMER-TIME.

Nobody can deny that the complexity of doing what bureaucrats tell you to do, daily grows more hellish; so that unless you can deputise, you might as well give up your own job altogether, in spite of their instructions that you must use double vigour to get on with it? I said and meant, hellish. On our doormats, instead of the usual WELCOME, they have set, with loud mocking laughter, four letters: P.A.Y.E. In case this grows simple, they send you fresh papers every financial year, re-complicating the formula: You subtract the fact that your cook is over seventy, but on the other hand you add the wages of the insurance clerk for his part in the system, plus the panel doctor you did not have because you called in her own doctor for whom she had a special fancy (and then paid his bill *yourself*). And finally, having multiplied by her old-age pension, reckoned on her rise, less half her stamps and a trunk call of six minutes to her sister in Somerset . . .

Other people have their headaches, too. I treasure a document from my literary agents: the statement of a small fee received for a French translation of one of my short stories, less their normal commission *and* less something called French Tax: "Twenty-one per cent on 80 per cent of 90 per cent." Amounting to 15s. 10d.

Twenty-one per cent *on* 80 per cent *of* 90 per cent?

I see.

I do seem almost to have mastered one form of mental acrobatics in this line. At last I can dictate a telegram on the telephone, saying the orthodox O for orange and T for Tommy. I should like to say I can rattle it off, but that would be an untruth;

I am still laborious; I still say, "Wait a minute," while I think; I still ask frantically, "Oh, dear, what *is* D for?" I should like to write a light comedy, opening Act I with a character dictating a desperately important telegram: "Love you more than ever—" And not able to remember the accepted code, she spontaneously invents her own code: *L for liquor*, O for oxtongue. The telephone girl interrupts to ask her to spell oxtongue, involving a whole fresh set of symbols.

"X for—oh, dear, wait a minute—X for expatiate, T for t-t-tam-o'-shanter."

And then the voice breaking in: "Did you say X?"

"Yes, X for exhibition."

"That wasn't what you said, was it?"

"No, not exactly, but it's better than what I said before."

Silence. Then: "Is O for Oxford the address?"

"No, no. *No!* it's who O is *for*—after L for liquor. L. O. V—for victory, that's an easy one. E for easy."

"Did you say F for pill-box a minute ago?"

"No, *never* pill-box. F doesn't come into it. When did you suppose I said pill-box?"

And so on ad infinitum, wheels within wheels; until the Practical Person of the play enters, overhears, takes over and rattles off the telegram at a terrifying pace in the official code.

The play might start with a wedding in the house, and the bride in attempting to dash off a telegram vital to her whole future, unheard by anyone. And the person who comes in and calmly takes over could be the bridegroom, whom she had hitherto looked on as negligible. Yes, I must write that play one day, and call it *F for Pill-Box*.

Two or three more items for the department of It's A Funny Thing About Me:

I find it infinitely harder to write to a dressmaker explaining clearly and effectively on paper any minor alteration I need done

in the dress or skirt or blouse I am sending her, than to write any chapter of this book, or indeed, the whole book, or any other book.

I hate seeing flowers in vases even begin to die, and would throw them away at the first barely visible brown crinkle round the petals; but where possible I throw them away in a garden or wood, out of doors, not into waste-paper baskets. Yet I cannot bear to have round me, on hats or dresses or in vases, flowers that do not die, that cannot, will not ever die. However skilful, perfect, expensive such flowers may be, made at the very best shops from the most exquisite materials, I would prefer to have none. (This may come under the Excessive Sensibility heading; or is it in reality the same? a nicer-sounding name for *It's a Funny Thing About Me.*)

My curious dislike for anonymous presents, or presents with the name of the donor lost and untraceable. Again, I would prefer to have none. A strong natural repugnance to anonymous letters is naturally shared by most people; but surely my fear is out of all proportion, whenever I am told someone rang up (or came to see me) and "*wouldn't leave a name.*" I assure you that this reaction has nothing to do with possible blackmail. Only I like people and presents attached to names. Names and everything to do with them have always fascinated me.

I cannot bear that form of teasing which keeps you on the rack till you have guessed: "Go on—*guess!*" "Give you three guesses!" "You shan't have it till you've guessed!" . . . Guessing games when you were a child. Guess who it is! Guess who's been! Guess what he said about you! It's a form of teasing, of course, like all the varieties of teasing where you can be sure that what is fun for the teaser is frenzy for the teased. Surely there are games that are fun for both? You are exposed to teasing unless you happen to be the pet of the family or the Delicate One or the privileged eldest; the dictionary defines it: "To assail playfully or maliciously, vex with jests, questions or petty annoyances, importune, pick into separate fibres." The latter phrase applies, I believe, to a

different sort of teasing (what you do to flax); but it sums up adequately what most of us feel under the treatment—as though we had been picked into separate fibres. Teasing, moreover, is a waste of time, uncreative, bad for the temper, wounding—no, no, not wounding the *tease*; the tease of a large family always looks particularly merry and healthy and fresh, grows younger with the years, walks with a kind of satisfied roll—or is this my hectic fancy? The eldest could give protection, but is usually too far away from the wriggling tail of a long line to see what is going on; for in a really large family, the eldest and youngest rarely meet in that pleasant no-man's-land where an indistinguishable gang, all vaguely seeming of the same age, go whooping, rollicking, shouting, tumbling, calling, pelting down the carefree days. Sometimes the eldest will come in for a little breathless hero-worship, and return it by the sort of rough and harmless petting handed down from the top, as given to a puppy or a kitten; no sentimentality in either case; sentimentality, a silly weed, dies in large families. Sentiment, thank goodness, lives and throws down deep, strong roots.

Every large family has nearly always, by paradox, an "only child" among them. If she be good-tempered (call it "she" for convenience), she will be ruthlessly sent by the others to fetch what they require, to carry what is burdensome, to run their errands, to repair their mistakes. She can either take a line from the start, and warned by the casual opening: "Will you be an angel—?" reply firmly: "*Not* if it's upstairs"; or else she must firmly establish herself as the Delicate One. You can get away with murder in a large family if you are the Delicate One.

Yet as a serious fact, a well-known psychiatrist told me that an only child had to be brought to him for treatment far *less* than children with a number of brothers and sisters. I should certainly have supposed the contrary, arguing that to be a member of a large family prepared you for the world later on; when you will already have met every type within a large range, and have learnt early how to deal with each, from the fool to the genius, under

the familiar guise of brother and sister; absorbing into your very bones the experience of when to be philosophical and when to endure silently, when to dodge or when to take the blow and fight back. You will have learnt loyalty, equality, sharing, keeping secrets, how best to handle wrathful authority, the advantage of having punishments spread thinly among many, the disadvantage of having jam spread too thinly among too many. Yet then it occurred to me that a psychiatrist is bound to see a good many cases of inferiority complex, due not merely to the feeling of "I'm of no importance" (true in essence about most of us), but, in a large family, to an unbalanced claim of the ego which has had opportunity to lose caste in too close measurement with other clamorous young claims and egos; an only child, with whatever troubles of readjustment later on, would be hardly likely to suffer from this particular neurosis; for an only child goes unchallenged; wistful, dreamy, spoilt, consequential, sometimes unbearable—but important.

I seem to be pouring out all the disadvantages of belonging to a large family, when in reality, asked if I think it an advantage, I leap in with the same enthusiastic assent as ninety-nine people out of a hundred. So before I marshal the obvious benefits, let me mention one or two more reasons against it: If by sheer luck a large family need never be wholly disintegrated, they are freed from a desperate necessity to seek intimate friends or mope alone; and score by the never-ceasing interest and stir and variety of what goes on among themselves; yet in the normal course of events, brothers and sisters are separated as they grow up, and then the idiosyncratic "family jokes" and racy "family language" of their childhood may easily have rendered them tiresomely unintelligible to the rest of the world; so that it sometimes becomes difficult not only to fraternize, but to communicate at all.

A curious specimen point has been brought to me by a "middle one" among fourteen, that to be a member of a large family produces anxiety over possessions. "Why?" I asked in my innocence. "Surely it teaches you how to share?" A touch of cynicism in her

succinct retort: "Teaches you how to *grab!*" She added that favouritism was to blame, and not-enough-to-go-round in the way of treats, gifts, toys, and sweets; and that in a large family, the bumptious ones are liable to be more bumptious and acquisitive, and the crushed ones utter *pâté*.

It's a funny thing about me—that I can be strongly influenced by a speaking voice capable of colour and tenderness and mockery; a flexible voice, not loud, not strident, not monotonous. . . . And nevertheless I avoid voices when they *sing*; unless maybe when I hear soldiers on the march, or huge crowds singing the "Battle Hymn of the Republic," or the Choir of King's College in "Adeste Fideles." But opera-singing, concert-singing, glee-singing, oratorio-singing—no, not for dis chile, as they say in bad plantation plays. I'm always sorry when in Beethoven's glorious Ninth Symphony, after the theme for the last movement, the choral movement, has been orchestrally introduced, the voices rise to their feet (that's how the vocal seems to become the visual, when one is listening to the wireless), and Heaven, as far as I am concerned, tumbles to earth again. In Delius's *Sea Drift*, the introduction might be the very sound of the sea itself, before the singers begin to sing. Nevertheless, I am glad not to be professionally compelled to express the sea in music or in paint. I myself cannot write about the sea, yet it certainly has been done, both in poetry and in prose. But if one were an artist suffering from desire for the sea that nothing could quench except taking it captive into one's own medium, where and how would one place the first stroke? Think of it—here is the canvas, here my palette with the paint squeezed out, here in my hand the brushes . . . and there in front of me, the sea. For these strange restless compulsions give you no peace; you have to get *closer*; you have to rope it in; it becomes a personal love-affair.

My own way of wedding the sea (when not actually in it) is by endlessly picking up shells. (When I *am* in, that settles it; the love-affair is consummated and restlessness dies.)

Do I love shells more for the fact that a hundred thousand can each one be startlingly different in colour and design, or that each one of these has a million million—leaving out the numberless noughts—exactly the same? Being me, I am more likely to give thanks for the familiar recognition of a shell picked up at the age of fifty-six on the Velvet Strand of Portmarnock in Ireland, because my mind can match it to a shell I picked up when I was six on the beach at Broadstairs.

The official "seaside" is not at all the same thing as the edge of land washed by the sea. If you look back on a conventional childhood, you were probably taken or sent (as I was) to the official seaside; not a resort, but a small safe place on the coast of England that had a doctor and a post-office and a few convenient shops so that no Nanny need grumble. My parents' choice was Broadstairs, and there from about 1895 (till I was presumably old enough for them to take me abroad, eliminating Nanny), I was planted with my elder sister for six weeks every summer, to join two other little girls with their elder sisters and their two Nannies. During the war—this recent war—I was asked to contribute an article to a magazine series "My Favourite Seaside Place," and in a nice nostalgic mood I chose Broadstairs, discarding that passion for Cornwall which came later. It happened that the editor had reserved mine for the last article in the series; and I was pushed out, not unnaturally, by a big scoop which followed the discovery of maps in Germany showing Hitler's plans for occupying various of these childish Edens along the south and southeast coast. Firmly refusing to let my bout of nostalgia submit to obscurity, I'm giving it this wistful renaissance.

"Children who live always by the sea never care so much about digging as the little visitors who come down in the summer, and whose very first idea at the sight of the sea is 'spades and buckets.'" . . .

This description of children who took the seaside for granted, from Mrs. Molesworth's *Carrots*, left me wide-eyed and incredulous.

lous; for I was not a child who lived always by the sea. My way to Paradise, in the 1890's, went down by a long stairway hewn out of rock and twisting through the cliff itself, a perilous voyage that might have led us to Persephone's Underworld. But we knew better than to be frightened; at the end of the echoing semi-darkness could be seen a tiny archway of brilliant light that grew larger and brighter at every downward step, till at last with an exultant shout we plunged out on to the hot, powdery pale-gold sands, tore off our plimsolls and stockings, and scampered full tilt on to even more golden, more delectable regions, where the sands spread firmer and cooler under our bare, burning soles. The lumps of white chalk lying about on the higher reaches beyond the weedy tide-mark, we took back to London when Paradise and summer holiday were over, with an assortment of marine reliquaries, including the undesirable shower of fine sand—undesirable from Nanny's point of view—which fell from every shoe on unpacking. The lumps of chalk were given to Father to use on his billiard cues for the rest of the year; something useful to be picked up for nothing, like blackberries and mushrooms, always fascinating to a London child.

The uneven rocky steps through the cliff at Broadstairs have been replaced now by an open concrete stairway, every tread alike, and benches to rest at intervals as you trudge steeply back to your lunch; I suppose it is all for the best—far fewer tumbles and bruised knees—but when I want to encourage myself in nostalgia (a deplorable thing to do, and goodness knows I need little encouragement), I remember that cold, sunless, exciting smell stored up in the dark of the old way down.

As far as I know, and counting till before the war, this is the only big change in Broadstairs since my childhood. I returned there eight or nine years ago with a certain apprehension, but I need not have feared: the ancient enchantment gradually encircled me again. For Broadstairs is not one of the conventional seaside places; it still has an innocent air of being vividly invented in crooked coloured pictures to illustrate a story-book of Mrs.



Molesworth's period. And indeed, in spite of its unquestionable amenities—a very grown-up word—it still feels to me not altogether a grown-up place; and I do not only mean because it is “so safe for the kiddies,” “so good for the toddlers,” “so nice for the tots” (one day all the maddened children of England will rise in revolution against these humiliating labels); for although it is safe, it is not commonplace; beyond sanctuary, you can easily imagine mysterious dangers, only held at bay by your own valour, which belong to the beloved story-books: you must *never* get caught by the tide, but solemnly ask every knowledgeable person of marine aspect, “When is it high today, please?” never scramble up the tall white cliffs—but then who would dare climb them, except in chase of bold bad smugglers who had to find a footing, crouch on ledges, hide in caves, when the excise-men were after them at dead of night? (They say the “Kentish Samson” was a smuggler at Broadstairs; you can still pay a respectful visit to his grave in St. Peter's Churchyard.) Nor could I have cared so passionately for any seaside not dominated by a lighthouse with a flashing blade that sliced the after-bed-time darkness; in Cornwall we had the Wolf and the Long Ships; in Scotland, Skerryvore and the Bell Rock; here, the North Foreland, a name like thunder itself, mingling with the crash of waves in a howling gale and the awe of hearing that the lifeboat crew have gone to the rescue of that ship out there on the “fatal Goodwins.” Once you had passed under York Gate, a stone and flint arch at the lower end of Harbour Street, you were out among all the rougher jollity of that irregular fishing-village end of the place: tarry and briny, with rusty anchors and windlasses strewn about, bits of crab on the cobbles, boats swinging and bumping in the protective arm of the short sturdy pier; coils of rope near the lifeboat-shed with the old wooden figureheads bluntly carved in faded gilt and blue and red, stiffly looking out to sea; friendly funny little shops; the Garden on the Sands. There is something grey and strong about the pointed gateway which has to do with an older threat than merely Nanny's whim that harbour territory was forbidden terri-

tory. Forty years later than your first visit to Broadstairs, you were probably keen enough on history to listen when told that the pier was built in 1540 by the same man who put stout doors at York Gate, closing it against privateers and all marauders who might attempt a rushed landing from the sea . . . a thrill and a threat not only of the sixteenth century. The men of Bradstowe (as Broadstairs was called) were then and always the men of Kent, who did not care to have their land invaded.

. . . And now the child who was once myself, quitting harbour delights, turns and clambers up and up a steep path between high walls; aware that before reaching the freedom of the East Cliff, where the gulls wheel and scream above the thymey close-bitten turf, will be one more quaking moment, the moment of passing Bleak House, which nevertheless so queerly attracts me that I would not forego it by any simple expedient of remaining on the more formal West Cliff of Broadstairs. The sombre mansion, with its inscrutable stare out to sea from green-shuttered windows, was a legend obviously entwined with the *Oliver Twist* side of Dickens; sinister, not cheery like *David Copperfield*. . . . On the cliff-walk near the Albion, before it widens and spreads into the more usual promenade with bandstand and pleasure-garden, stands a low pleasant little house with a strip of grass in front, Aunt Betsey Trotwood's house. . . . "Janet, *donkeys!*" and the little Copperfield boy, blissful in his new home, had looked out on to that very garden and seen the donkeys chased away.

Returning to Broadstairs nearly fifty years after my first stay, I believed it too good and too strange to be true when I saw proclaimed on gay banners that Uncle Mack and his "Niggers" were still singing on the beach; the identical uncle himself, not certainly as vigorous as the coal-black young fellow I remembered, but with the same broad and genial face and huge pink slab of mouth painted on the ebony; Uncle Mack still conducting his adoring audience of children squatting in enormous semi-circles on the sand gazing up at Entertainment in a Big Way. . . . "Now then, first the boys! Can't let the little girls beat you, you know!

Come on, sing up, and let's see who can sing loudest!" and then the shrill chorus, rising at first rather wobbly and uncertain, singing perhaps of any old umbrellas, or of nice people with nice manners who've got no money at all . . . topical enough today as nine years ago; but when I was led by Uncle Mack in the 1890's, we sang a song equally topical in its predicament (though not in its charges), about a man who had a couple of rooms to let—"at 7s. 6d. a week"—and was mobbed by hordes of applicants.

And still and always the little girls sing louder than the little boys, and win the competition.

Broadstairs seen as a story-book might have *The Little Girls Sing Louder* as a title, and it would be bound to have a chapter called "The Seven Bays." Seven, the magical number. Main Bay is a name which cannot stir the imagination, but the others are more stimulating: Kingsgate Bay (where Charles II landed at his Restoration); Botany Bay; Dumpton Bay; Stone Bay; Louisa Bay; Joss Bay. The time to go hunting for shells among the rocks and pools was when the tide went out on any of these. The pointed purple spiral was rare, but not too rare for triumphant finding, and so was the tiny perfect saucer of mother-o'-pearl, and the cowrie's exquisite infolding curve. No collection of mature years has ever been so rewarding as when soaked and on the verge of crying, you suddenly saw your coveted trophy gleam just ahead, where the wave has washed and receded, and where "the others" have not yet seen it. With this treasure carefully bestowed in your pail (a rather adult affair in grey zinc; the brightly painted buckets were only fit for the kiddies, the toddlers, and the tots), you decided your legs ached too much for further exploration, so you plumped down damply on a comfortable rock and rested, and watched the shrimps, so oddly grey instead of tea-time pink, dart like shadows below the surface of the pool, and licked your fingers for the relish of their salty taste, and watched the delicate fronds of weed, green and rust and amber, waving gently and hypnotically, till your daytime dreams began to wave in the same rhythm. . . .

I can resist crabs, urchins, starfish, shrimp, shining ribbons of seaweed, but to shells I put up no resistance; I *have* to pick them up.

It's a funny thing about me, but I have to pick up sticks too. In winter when we have an open fire at home, a walk through the woods is a perpetual torment if I have to pass the sticks for others to gather to take home: beautiful dry, tempting sticks, small thick sticks, though not as thick as logs; sticks that will help the sulkiest fire to blaze up; not twigs thin and spindly, nor damp wood, nor green. After a high wind, millions of sticks lie in your path; you do not have to pay for sticks from the wood; they are free as mushrooms and blackberries are free. I have never understood why Cinderella made such heavy weather when sent out to pick them up, as though it were a gloomy task and a punishment. I offer my private version of the story: that nobody sent her at all; she wistfully offered to go because the woods were full of sticks, and she enjoyed the fresh air while her two elder sisters were helping with the stuffy indoor work of the house. But Cinderella was the youngest and therefore the petted darling of them all. She put it across the rest a fair treat. Her step-mother spoilt her on the "headmaster's son" analogy; just because the other two were her own daughters, she sternly refused to give them extra privileges; a nice fair-minded woman.

I might as well finish the story, viewed from that angle. . . .

The Prince sees Cinderella and falls for her, but she thinks him a frightful bore, not a patch on Buttons. He sends her a card for the Ball, and she hands it to her step-sisters and helps them dress and lends them some of her lovely clothes. They cannot persuade her to go. After they have reluctantly departed, and she and Buttons are necking, her godmother turns up from the Palace; says she will stand no nonsense, angrily sends Buttons packing, helps Cinderella into one of her many beautiful ball-dresses, rings up for a car, and sends her off, with many severe admonitions to be amiable. Cinderella calls back over her shoulder a rebellious in-

tention to flit as early as she can, and her godmother replies that she'll damn' well stay till *the end*.

The Prince tries to kiss her out in the garden, after she had dodged him successfully in the ballroom for some time; but she breaks away. And seeing a hired car just about to drive down the avenue after depositing some late guests, she rushes after it (losing her shoe) and hurls herself in just as the clock strikes twelve . . . and is driven home: "I *hate* parties and getting to bed late! Besides, I'll have to be out early picking up sticks . . . or they'll beat me." Business of quivering underlip. Cinderella knew her stuff.

But I agree with her over parties.

It's a funny thing about me: I love and need companionship, and yet I am never sure about going into company.

"My idea of good company, Mr. Elliot, is the company of clever, well-informed people, who have a great deal of conversation: that is what I call good company."

"You are mistaken," said he gently; "that is not good company: that is the best."

I love gaiety, but flag inwardly if not visibly, on occasions of organized gaiety. This may be the reason why many of the happiest times of my life have been in house-parties, my own or of an intimate friend; such as that Christmas week when six of us were gathered together at a villa on the Mediterranean; or when I was one of a quartette on a wine-tour by car all over France during the September vintage season in 1926; or when, a different four, we planned to spend ten days in spring at a small, isolated inn on the island of Skye. I think "light-hearted" is the key-word of these parties which are not parties at all, marked for happiness by my secret seal: the lovely freedom and reassurance of having my own bedroom and my own occupation, and the others to have theirs. I do not care for the claustrophobic feeling of giving a party or going to a party when everything else is held up and held back while the party has to go on; no physical escape to bed

or the open air until "officially" over and I am sanctioned to leave, or have to endure by the laws of hospitality and courtesy till it—the party—leaves me. I do not want to "keep company" during a definite length of time measured off for talk, for food, for entertainment. I want company to go and return and go again. . . . "The situation is fluid." Let it flow like water around me, so that being-alone can happen as often and as naturally as being-together. I like the spirit of the party in the house, as long as I need not be all the while vigilant for its success or failure. Yet I cannot bear the silence and isolation of living alone, the house empty but for me, with all the childish implications that nobody wants me because they each have someone else and I am the only one outlawed and outside and love-locked-out; an Ishmael defiantly pretending that one would a jolly sight rather be Ishmael than Isaac. I revel in being alone while warm, homely, companionable things are going on in other parts of the house, as it might be jam-making in the kitchen from one's own gathering of fruit; I can open doors and hear it and join in, or shut it away, yet know while absorbed at my own specialised job, that it still is not dead.

I understand how Ishmael felt, poor sweet; but the "Ishmael Act" always irritates me intensely: "Mustn't bother about me if I disappear at any moment and you hear nothing for months and months. Don't want any of my friends to know where I am. Got to be alone and right away from everyone. My pals must just lump not having my address. Not going to have my letters forwarded. . . ."

And his subsequent annoyance when there are none. Ishmael, proud and fierce and free.

A certain picturesque glamour will always attach itself to Robin Hood and his outlaws, to the men of the Foreign Legion, to the lurcher dog belonging to real Romany stock. (The lurcher may not have the right to saunter in with a careless nod past the three-headed commissioner guarding the portals of the Kennel Club, but he has an exceptional knack, shared by no other breed, of

catching a hedgehog and bringing it in for the gypsies to roll in mud and bake in ashes.)

One has to return to the story of the first Ishmael to discover why all his descendants have been made self-conscious:

And he will be a wild man; his hand will be against every man, and every man's hand against him.

Men with a genuine instinct to retreat into solitude compel respect ("What's become of Waring since he gave us all the slip?"), but an Ishmael getting a kick out of the traditional gestures of the outcast is so much more likely to get his kick in a more literal way. Traditional Gestures are always exasperating; does one stamp one's foot, ever, in a rage, or is it a tradition handed down from a doubtful rumour, perhaps, of one man who was reputed to have done it in 1492? Like wringing one's hands, or beating one's head against the wall, or other Traditional Gestures expressing rage or grief, frenzy or suspense? Yes, I *have* slammed doors (not often) in a rage, thrown myself on the floor in grief. Can I now objectively analyse why? The door was because it was a relief to hear a great crashing noise through the house, and know that other people heard it too; it comes under a "They'll-be-sorry" heading. Working all this out, I stamped to find out if it came naturally . . . and nearly brought the house down—or up—to see what on earth was the matter. I have seen small children clench their fists and stamp their feet; the two go together; is it genuinely primitive? And should one organise an expedition to discover whether little savage children do the same? A doctor suggested to me that they do it instinctively to retain their physical balance when anger makes them wobbly.

As for throwing myself on the floor in grief, that, I am inclined to think, is more genuine than door-slamming; a longing for temporary obliteration by getting as far down on the earth, into the earth, under the earth, as the politeness of indoor furnishings will allow.

But no doubt of it, other people's Traditional Gestures, like those of ham actors, can be intensely irritating. We tolerate an actor rubbing his stomach to show he is hungry, if miming; directly he is given accompanying words to express hunger, it becomes redundant to rub his stomach. I knew a girl who made the fatal mistake of letting me *see* her be plausible: plausible with her eyes, her tone of voice, her very body. It's a funny thing about me, I respond to good handling while remaining definitely conscious and appreciative of the right way to handle me; therefore I am as cross as two sticks when mishandled, whereas most people get vaguely panicky and exasperated by the process, or soothed and malleable, without quite knowing what is going on. But certainly the word "plausible" ought never to come into my mind *while* I am being handled, or all is lost. (All *was* lost, and the plausible girl never knew why.)

I am convinced that Rodin's famous statue of Le Penseur never had a thought in his life, and was just "sitting like that"; yet I will apologise if I get enough letters sincerely assuring me that "my uncle, the well-known Professor So-and-So, always does his thinking exactly like Le Penseur."

E. F. Benson's Lucia always moved into a traditional First Position for Thinking. Lucia had a special attitude for listening to music, a special wistfulness and a special little sigh at the end (or was that when she herself had finished playing the first movement of the *Moonlight Sonata*?). I wonder how many of us are guilty of some such sigh not strictly necessary to *our* Sonata, and have not yet caught ourselves out?

We are always ready to confess on a note of bogus diffidence: "I'm afraid I can't read novels; I prefer biography"—(or history, or politics, or theology, or any other form of Belles Lettres). But the lettres that are not belles, which are, in fact, not letters at all, but an escape into happiness by the oldest, swiftest route in the world, the story-book route—on these we usually keep a guilty



silence unless confident of being among our fellow escapists. Yet even in this territory finely shaded levels exist of height and depth.

I think it is rather presumptuous to make copy out of grief or loneliness or fear. Only the truly big writers, Shakespeare or Dostoevski, Stendhal or Ibsen or Tolstoy or Balzac or Dickens, men who "bestride the narrow earth like a Colossus," can retrieve some wilder, truer message than the comfort and fun to be scattered by a small book about small people in small gatherings. For there are other things to be done about the narrow earth than to bestride it. Yet we would never be overcome by confusion at being discovered reading and re-reading any of these giants on a desert island, nor hesitate in explaining to our rescuers that we had only had time to select *one* book to chuck on to the raft, and so as a matter of course. . . . At which the Captain would reply respectfully that that was O.K. by him; and we would have run no risk of losing caste—

—As we might have, for instance, if we had clambered aboard owning to no other choice for a desert-island book than an Omnibus volume of *Lucia* by E. F. Benson.

Nobody could pretend that these fascinating chronicles (*Queen Lucia: Miss Mapp; Lucia in London: Mapp and Lucia; Lucia's Progress: Trouble for Lucia*) occupy legitimate status in high altitudes of immortal literature, by their noble interpretation of human philosophy in suffering. Certainly they contain thoughts on human nature at its most ignoble, which are revealed with devastating frankness in dialogue and action by a small resident group of English ladies and gentlemen in a couple of English villages.

The ingenuous snobbery of any group which *Lucia* happened to lead is part of its irresistible charm; they all lead lives on the smallest possible scale, and at the same time they are entirely persuaded of the vast importance and magnitude of whatever they plan or do or fail to do. When this method is applied with genius, when the protagonists are loved by their chronicler as

well as maliciously observed and set down, then we have the novels of Jane Austen, not of E. F. Benson. A distinct similarity, for instance, can be traced between the social life of Tilling and of Highbury. By the time the Lucia books were written, transport by train and car had replaced the coaching of Jane Austen's day; yet this does not affect another odd resemblance: once our attention has been concentrated on a certain group settled in a certain neighbourhood, there they are likely to remain. The Tillingites hardly ever go away; travel does not seem to enter into their scheme of things; when they desire a change, they have devised an excellent plan whereby they let their houses to each other on a descending scale, each moving into one slightly cheaper than their own. And when they do go away, it is not treated as a matter of course, but becomes an Expedition.

This not irrelevant quotation is from a letter written by Jane Austen to her niece, who had sent her the first chapter of a novel for her criticism:

. . . You are now collecting your People delightfully, getting them exactly into such a spot as is the delight of my life; 3 or 4 Families in a Country Village is the very thing to work on—& I hope you will write a great deal more, & make full use of them while they are so very favourably arranged.

## CHAPTER XI Not for Publication

I not only love but need the books of Jane Austen, and yet remain comparatively indifferent to her life and her letters; her *Life* and her *Letters*. Showing this reaction, however, in reverse, I am passionately addicted to reading the biographies of (for instance) Dickens and Barrie and Stevenson and the Brontës; and might indeed say of all of them that I find such deep satisfaction in how they lived and the letters they wrote, that rather than forego these, I could more easily yield up their fiction. Oddly enough, I discovered a possible reason why, after reading a life of Trollope, for I was mildly interested in the first third of it, but my interest broke down when he passed into success, financial security, and domestic contentment; it would seem, therefore, that I subconsciously sought in fiction an escape into happiness and serenity, but went to biography for its identification with the restless, stormy periods of my own life.

Jane Austen's gaiety and wit and ironic perception of character lighten every page of her novels, and enthusiasts of her letters have pointed out to me, with harsh looks for my denseness and lack of appreciation, that these qualities are equally to be found in profusion on every page of her letters. But that is nothing to the profusion of *names* on every page. I have become so closely acquainted with every person in, let us say, *Emma*, that I know them almost better than I know my own intimate friends; once we have been introduced to them, however, the author does not keep on perpetually describing fresh encounters—only to whip them off the scene after they have spoken no more than a couple of lines, or figured, maybe, in one minor incident. Whereas in her letters there is no end to the procession; my memory will not hold

such a variety of persons; I would have to be for ever glancing back through the pages to discover who they are, how related, where they live. "You know how interesting the purchase of a sponge-cake is to me"—one of the few quotations from the Letters that have become universally known. I have not the slightest objection to Miss Austen purchasing a sponge-cake and letting me into the fascinating minutiae of such a purchase; I would not miss any of it for worlds; but in the very same paragraph are four names, not counting members of her own family, whom of course we are ready to meet at all times. So just out of curiosity, I went down those two pages counting how many people occur in them: seventeen. Their names jig up and down and confuse me sadly. Let me come to rest in her novels where there is no such bewildering multiplicity. If she had written *one* letter beginning (for instance) "Oh, I'm so unhappy"—but no, she hardly ever makes even a distant approach to her feelings, except perhaps in that moving group of letters near the end, where she tries to express gratitude to her family, and especially to her sister Cassandra, for their tender exertions on her behalf during her last illness.

Not, of course, that one would wish Jane Austen to be unhappy merely to provide a collection of the right sort of letters for us to be reading and re-reading a hundred and twenty years later. It is good to know that the Austens did not dwell in the same darkness as the Brontës, who saw their daily life by flashes of lightning and heard it in the menacing rumble of thunder. Only I maintain that Jane Austen's convivial vein of correspondence cannot have been the whole of it; and we are in fact aware that after her death Cassandra burnt all those letters which may have revealed sorrow or joy; joy on a more radiant plane than light-hearted pleasure and mischievous comment. Was Cassandra justified in doing this? Heaven only knows: for we have arguments on either side that could go on for all eternity. Have the Immortals a right to privacy after their death? Can they say to the world: "I have left you my work and that should be enough; the rest is silence"? And when we long for more, is it from impertinent curi-

osity? Surely not. And further—did Cassandra burn all the intimate letters by her sister's own wish? That naturally would mute all discussion; she would have to respect and carry out a beloved sister's solemn injunction, or know no rest herself. Or did Cassandra burn them, so to speak, off her own bat? I will surrender to being robbed of Jane *by* Jane, but would be rebellious if I have been victimised only by Cassandra's delicacy of feeling; for, damn it, she *had* the letters, indelible for all time in her memory; whereas we are left to speculate and wonder and furiously deny Miss Mitford's estimate of her as vain and frivolous and shallow. . . . She was not; she cannot have been. But where is the documentary evidence? "A blank, my lord; she never told her love."

And letters are dangerous in survival, unless all are to survive. I recently had a shock, when to tease me (and you may remember I do not take kindly to being teased), I was shown a copy of a letter that had *not* been destroyed, but is still treasured in a private collection. It was written by Fanny, Jane Austen's niece, confidentially to her sister when, I gather, both were middle-aged married ladies.

Yes my love it is very true that Aunt Jane from various circumstances was not so *refined* as she ought to have been from her *talent*, & if she had lived 50 years later she would have been in many respects more suitable to *our* more refined tastes. They were not rich & the people around with whom they chiefly mixed, were not at all high bred, or in short anything more than *mediocre* & *they* of course tho' superior in *mental powers* & *cultivation* were on the same level as far as *refinement* goes—but I think in later life their intercourse with Mrs. Knight (who was very fond of & kind to them) improved them both & Aunt Jane was too clever not to put aside all possible signs of 'common-ness' (if such an expression is allowable) & teach herself to be more refined, at least in intercourse with people in general. Both the Aunts (Cassandra & Jane) were brought up in the most complete ignorance of the World & its ways (I mean as to fashion &c) & if it had not been for Papa's marriage which brought them into Kent, & the kindness of Mrs. Knight, who used often to have one or the other of the sisters staying with her, they would have been, tho' not less clever & agreeable in themselves, very much be-

low par as to good Society and its ways. If you hate all this I beg yr. pardon, but I felt it at my *pen's end* & it chose to come along & speak the truth. . . .

"My dearest Fanny," literally the dearest, the most tenderly loved of her nieces, had as a young girl received many letters expressing Jane Austen's delight in her.

My dearest Fanny, You are inimitable, irresistible. You are the delight of my Life. Such Letters, such entertaining Letters as you have lately sent!—Such a description of your queer little heart!—Such a lovely display of what Imagination does.—You are worth your weight in Gold, or even in the new Silver Coinage.—I cannot express to you what I have felt in reading your history of yourself, how full of Pity & Concern & Admiration & Amusement I have been. You are the Paragon of all that is Silly & Sensible, common-place & eccentric, Sad & Lively, Provoking & Interesting.—Who can keep pace with the fluctuations of your Fancy, The Capprizios of your Taste, the Contradiction of your Feelings?—You are so odd!—& all the time, so perfectly natural—so peculiar in yourself, & yet so like everybody else!—It is very, very gratifying to me to know you so intimately. You can hardly think what a pleasure it is to me, to have such thorough pictures of your Heart. . . .

This extract must suffice to point the bitter irony and ingratitude of Lady Knatchbull's complaint, some fifty years later, of the lack of refinement in her late aunts Jane and Cassandra.

It is impossible to remain detached from a verdict so utterly lacking not only in perception, but in decent family feeling. If Cassandra had been too loyal to Jane, the brother of Cassandra and Jane had better have remained a bachelor all his life than have begotten a daughter as stupid, as snobbish, and as ungrateful. Benefits forgot!—for if I am not utterly mistaken, she was the very niece to whom Jane had shown most warm affection; delighting in her talents, encouraging them; secure in the belief that here was a kindred spirit and that such happiness was reciprocated; paying no heed to the artificial barrier that had placed them a generation apart.

Like Henry V, (again) I did not know how angry I was until this instant.

Nor, perhaps, did Browning know how angry *he* was till he wrote a certain letter on the same subject, and apparently posted it, firmly letting the sun go down upon his wrath. My own technique, when my soul is stammering with rage, is usually to write the letter which helps me to retain my sanity, expressing what I feel in a way which is (I must subconsciously recognise) setting it outside the possibility of ever posting it. One becomes at such moments a Border-Line Case, licks down the envelope and stamps it with a definite air, for of course a stamp settles it and it *must* be posted. . . . Nevertheless I do not post it; I do not re-read it; I do not open the envelope. Presently I steam off the stamp, and the letter lies at the back of a drawer for months, often for years. Wrath grows old and wrath grows cold, though not in a week, not in a month; wrath runs parallel with memory, and vanishes as slowly and mysteriously as love. When I have so completely forgotten what it is all about that I am mildly amazed and interested, viewing it with as detached a spirit as though it were fiction, then the letter gets torn up. I daresay I shall find one or two of these presently, before I come to the end of this chapter. Meanwhile, here is the letter which Browning did *not* tear up:

. . . Ever since I set foot in England I have been pestered with applications for leave to write the Life of my wife—I have refused—and there an end. I have last week received two communications from friends, enclosing the letters of a certain . . . of . . . asking them for details of life and letters, for a biography he is engaged in—adding, that he “has secured the correspondence with her old friend. . . .” Think of this beast working away at this, not deeming my feelings or those of her family worthy of notice—and meaning to print letters written years and years ago, on the most intimate and personal subjects to an “old friend”—which, at the poor . . . [friend’s] death fell into the hands of a complete stranger, who at once wanted to print them, but desisted through Ba’s earnest expostulation enforced by my own threat to take law proceedings—as fortunately letters are copyright. I find this woman died last year, and her son writes to me this morning that . . . got them from him as auto-

graphs merely—he will try and get them back . . . evidently a blackguard, got my letter, which gave him his deserts, on Saturday—no answer yet,—if none comes, I shall be forced to advertise in the Times, and obtain an injunction. But what I suffer in feeling the hands of these blackguards (for I forgot to say another man has been making similar applications to friends) what I undergo with their paws in my very bowels, you can guess, and God knows! No friend, of course, would ever give up the letters—if anybody ever is forced to do that which *she* would have writhed under—if it ever *were* necessary, why, I should be forced to do it, and, with any good to her memory and fame, my own pain in the attempt would be turned into joy—I should *do* it at whatever cost: but it is not only unnecessary but absurdly useless—and, indeed, it shall not be done if I can stop the scamp's knavery along with his breath.

I am going to reprint the Greek Christian Poets and another essay—nothing that ought to be published shall be kept back,—and this she certainly intended to correct, augment, and reproduce—but I open the doubled-up paper! Warn anyone you may think needs the warning of the utter distress in which I should be placed were this scoundrel, or any other of the sort, to baffle me and bring out the letters—I can't prevent fools from uttering their folly upon her life, as they do on every other subject, but the law protects property—as these letters are. Only last week, or so, the Bishop of Exeter stopped the publication of an announced "Life"—containing extracts from his correspondence—and so I shall do. . . .

"With their paws in my very bowels!"

But here is the story of a lady (quoted by "Menander") whose extreme delicacy in the matter of intimate and private letters, would have made Browning love her:

During the present war, in New York, an English lady was a guest in the house of the owner of a great private library. After dinner she was seated on a sofa in a room shelved from floor to ceiling and full of precious things. Her host moved about behind her, taking down for her inspection books of which he was proud, and particularly—for he had the special imaginative courtesy of American hosts—those which, he thought, might please or comfort her by proving his love for her own country. He had plenty from which to choose. Few of his books were "rare" only in the sense of their being first editions of which other copies might be found elsewhere. Nearly all of them



were made unique by association; if you took *Treasure Island* from its case you found that it had been inscribed by Stevenson as a gift to his mother. The English lady examined, and talked to her host about each book shown to her, and while their conversation, and the conversation of others in the room, continued, treasures accumulated at her side. Then, saying nothing as he leaned over her shoulder, her host dropped into her lap a piece of manuscript. Continuing to turn the pages of the book already in her hand, and to talk of it, she did not at first observe the newcomer. Then she picked it up—listlessly, another treasure to be admired!—and began to read. She was silent, and with a silence so intense that the whole company was affected by it. Chatter ceased. It was as though she were passing through some deep personal experience, as though she herself were suffering and the world respected her suffering. When she had read perhaps a dozen or twenty lines, she raised her head, sought her host, handed the paper to him. "But have you read it?" She shook her head silently. "I can't. It wasn't for me." It was a letter of Keats.

The imagination she had exercised was strictly the historical imagination; she had felt what it was to be alive on the day and at the hour in which the letter was written; had seen the hand move across the page and felt the outward pressure of the pen on the holding fingers. Who will may say disapprovingly that she had "romanticized" Keats—a sin that shall be forgiven her.

Two self-revealing letters needing no comment, are those of the Reverend Patrick Brontë as a widower, proposing marriage to an old flame whom he hoped had remained single for his sake; and the lady's spirited and high-tempered rejection of his suit. The reply appeals to our sense of the ridiculous, and confirms not only that all is vanity, but that most of it is wounded vanity; for certainly, as you will see, the lady does not stay upon good manners. I am on the side of the Reverend Patrick; I do not think he deserved to be punched on his self-esteem with quite so much vigour. When you have read both letters, you may be able to trace with me some curious resemblance in their epistolary style (whether Miss Burder likes it or not) and in the bitterness with which they both wish each other well, and both wind up by dragging in vicars past and present. Such letters as these give true delight, and I am grateful to the executor who has not finally repressed them:

To Miss Burder—Finchingfield Park, Near Braintree, July 28th, 1823.

I experienced a very agreeable sensation in my heart, at this moment, on reflecting that you are *still* single, and I am so selfish as to wish you to remain so, even if you would never allow me to see you. You were the *first* whose hand I solicited, and no doubt I was the *first* to whom you *promised to give that hand*. . . .

However much you may dislike me now, I am sure you once loved me with an unaffected innocent love. . . . It is now almost fifteen years since I last saw you. This is a long interval of time and may have effected many changes. It has made me look something older. But, I trust I have gained more than I have lost, I hope I may venture to say I am *wiser* and better. I have found this world to be but vanity, and I trust I may aver that my heart's desire is to be found in the ways of divine wisdom, and in her paths, which are pleasantness and peace. My Dear Madam, I earnestly desire to know how it is in these respects with you. I wish, I ardently wish your *best* interests in *both* the worlds. Perhaps you have not had much trouble since I saw you, nor such experience as would unfold to your view in well defined shapes the unsatisfactory nature of all earthly considerations. . . . Though I have had much bitter sorrow in consequence of the sickness and death of my dear Wife, yet I have ample cause to praise God for his numberless mercies. I have a *small* but *sweet* little family that often soothe my heart and afford me pleasure by their endearing little ways, and I have what I consider a competency of the good things of this life. I am *now settled* in a part of the country *for life* where I have many friends, and it has pleased God in many respects to give me favour in the eyes of the people, and to prosper me in my ministerial labours. I want but *one* addition to my comforts, and then I think I would wish for no more on this side of Eternity. I want to see a dearly Beloved Friend, kind as I *once* saw her, and as *much* disposed to promote my happiness. If I have ever given her any pain I only wish for an opportunity to make her ample amends, by every attention and kindness. Should that very dear Friend doubt respecting the veracity of any of my statements, I would beg leave to give her the most satisfactory reference, I would beg to refer her to the Rev. John Buckworth, Vicar of Dewsbury near Leeds. . . .

To the Rev. Patrick Brontë. Haworth, Nr. Keighley. August 8th, 1823.

. . . From a recent perusal of many letters of yours . . . addressed to me and my dear departed Aunt many circumstances are brought with peculiar force afresh to my recollection. This review Sir excites in my bosom increased gratitude and thankfulness to that wise, that

indulgent, Providence which then watched over me for good and withheld me from forming in very early life an indissoluble engagement with one whom I cannot think was altogether clear of duplicity.

. . . Many communications were received from you in humble silence which ought rather to have met with contempt and indignation ever considering the sacredness of a promise. Your confidence I have never betrayed strange as was the disclosure you once made unto me; whether those ardent professions of devoted lasting attachment were sincere is now to me a matter of little consequence. "What I have seen and heard" certainly leads me to conclude very differently. With these my present views of past occurrences is it possible think you that I or my dear Parent could give you a cordial welcome to the Park as an *old friend*? Indeed I must give a *decided* negative to the desired visit. I know of no ties of friendship *ever* existing between us which the last eleven or twelve years have not severed or at least placed an insuperable bar to any revival. My present condition on which you are pleased to remark has hitherto been the state of my choice and to me a state of much happiness and comfort, tho I have not been exempted from some severe trials. Blessed with the kindest and most indulgent of friends in a beloved Parent, Sister, and Brother, with a handsome competency which affords me the capability of gratifying the best feelings of my heart, teased with no domestic cares and anxieties and without anyone to control or oppose me I have felt no willingness to risk in a change so many enjoyments in possession. . . . I can truly sympathise with you and the poor little innocents in your bereavement. The Lord can supply all your and their need. It gives me pleasure always to hear the work of the Lord prospering. May He enable you to be as faithful, as zealous, and as successful a labourer in His vineyard as one of your predecessors, the good old Mr. Grimshaw. . . .

The Reverend Patrick must have been disconcerted, if that is not too gentle a word, on receiving such an answer to his polite proposal. Probably he tore it up, danced in a fury on the pieces, hurled them into the waste-paper basket, kicked that round the room, and otherwise expressed his surprise by some sort of physical exercise. None of this appears, however, in his grieved reply to Miss Burder; grieved and forgiving. I expect it was then her turn to tear up, to stamp, to fling away, and maybe, being a woman, to weep; until her mother, coming down to breakfast,

asked: "Anything in the post, dear?" and she, a Spartan boy with the letter gnawing her vitals, would smile (like the rest of us at a similar moment) and rejoin casually: "No, Mother, nothing that matters; only a bill."

Has the post come? Anything for me? Are you sure? There *must* be! Why, were you expecting something? No, but still . . . No, we are rarely expecting anything, yet always expecting something, while we have an address and a front door. The desire for letters and the hope of what they will bring, the disappointment and after-flatness when reality proves a trifle less than all fame, all love, all fortune, and a grand surprise—these sensations are universal though hardly atavistic; for there can have been no posts in Eden nor in the prehistoric caves. Yet still we are more resentful when letters do not come than grateful when the amazing magic works, and a whole sheaf is brought in; we go rapidly through them, summing up with that reception-of-magic patter which again has become fairly universal: "Funny I don't know who this is from. Postmark Croften Green—Who lives at Croften Green?—*Nobody!*" (Rather a sweeping statement, though not meant, of course, in deprecation of Croften Green or any other Green as a postmark; merely that nobody lives anywhere unless you can put a face and a name to them, for letters are newspapers reduced to a personal scale.) "So-and-So again; I owe her two letters already." Yet one's voice is not wholly guilty; if So-and-So chooses to write for the third time without keeping a strict rule of give-and-take, that is simply because she is a much nicer person (or less busy) than oneself; nothing to worry about. Circular, bill, receipt, fan, wedding announcement, picture show, invitation, business, business—and at last, perhaps, a cry of joy, for this last of the packet is a *letter*, and now it is actually here in your hand; you hold it unopened, incredulous as the tramp, ragged and unshaven, waking under the haystack, by some freakish accident caught up into the grave daily routine of morning formalities . . . for standing there beside him is the postman, with

a strictly routine face, holding out three letters. This witty cartoon appeared in the series of "Who—Me?" I wonder for how many years it will continue to give me the keenest pleasure, not only when I look at it, but even when I think of it. It represents, once and for all, utter surprise made pictorial. Sometimes my response travels beyond pleasure into the very living heart of the cartoon, where I long to be seated beside Homeless Willie under that haystack, opening those three letters with appropriate ejaculations: "Fancy!" and "Auntie sends her love, how nice!"

As I may have mentioned before, I oddly remember and enjoy cartoons better than funny stories.

A film studio once wanted me to make a script from a novel that was out of print and difficult to get. At last triumphantly they sent me a copy of it; my mother would undoubtedly have said, "Don't touch it, dear; we don't know where it's *been*"; and one was old enough now to agree, to pick it up with a pair of tongs and deposit it well out of reach of infection. When I was about seven, on just one morning out of 365, I myself insisted on bringing in the post to my delicate mother, who had breakfast in bed, instead of letting it be brought as usual on a salver. The only letter (well-fingered by little Gladys) happened to be from an ex-servant, married and living in the Midlands, to announce that her husband and *all* her children had scarlet fever. . . . I thought they would never finish scrubbing me and scolding me for being officious and inquisitive.

If one pigeon-holes each letter under its specific adjective, that particular specimen started off the Unwelcome collection. Other labels might be the Homely letter (Dear Madam: I packed the custard powders wrapped up in the deck-chairs with the soap-flakes, and hope both arrived safely, Yours respectfully) and the Slipshod letter. It is not only strangers who can never quite get one's name right or the address or the spelling of either, though naturally only strangers still write to me as "Miss *Gertrude* Stern," a mistake which I have learnt to accept with the same weary resignation as my friend and colleague who also lives at Bramble-

ford, accepts "*Miss Marguerite Stein.*" For many years now, Stern and Steen, we appear to have split Gertrude Stein between us.

The War letter: My favourite in this pigeon-hole had been wrapped round a side of bacon delivered as a Christmas present from a friend of mine, an American airman on some special training course. The note itself was a mere scrawl, but on the other side were glorious teleprinted hieroglyphics and numbers which to a lay understanding might have been made by a triple millionaire working out his income tax . . . except for the heading "*Upper Air Bulletin,*" and under it, "*UNCAL 5000.*" My first airgraph, too, was a thrill, and every airgraph I ever received in various familiar handwritings, their scrawling characteristics reduced to Lilliputian neatness. And it was exciting to hear from a former secretary, on paper headed by practically the whole alphabet out of order:

This somewhat disheartening string of letters means that I've been removed at a few hours' notice to a strange destination in a sealed van—practically; a charabanc, anyway. I'm afraid I shan't be able to come down after all, as I'm here until Monday week and then return to Submarines. . . .

It is always pleasing to find a letter of that period in which the war news is taught its place and has to muck in with the rest of our local and household information. While I was in the country, Warrender, my houseman from London (the same who wrapped the custard powders in the deck-chair), wrote to me innocent of under-statement:

With the exception of the bomb which made a mess of our end of Brewer Street on Friday last there has been nothing exciting to relate. All the nearby shops had their fronts blown out; our butcher is very indignant.

Warrender is fond of quotation. In another letter he says: "Shall be very glad to welcome you home so that I can settle down again to the trivial round and common task:" and on his retirement he wrote: "I am going to tend my father's sheep;" as

he was over seventy and of an urban disposition, this reference to Norval startled me at first, for he never used quotation marks. He asked me once if he might invite a friend to tea here during my absence: "Yes, of course," and I asked what his friend did? He hesitated, and then: "I'm afraid, Madam . . . I have to confess he's a greengrocer," with a rather charming smile, shy and deprecating, yet not snobbish, because it was clearly for my sake he minded, not his own; the hesitation and the tone and the smile were a sincere gesture towards some mysterious and apparently not displeasing standard which he thinks I must surely possess, excluding greengrocery as an eligible occupation. He was a solemn old boy and kept himself to himself (a curious phrase when you come to think of it), except when on one occasion I invited him down to the country for a few days' change of air, and he asked me in his reply: "Would it be in order, Madam, for me to arm Mrs. L. to the nearest local?" Mrs. L. was my housekeeper. And from her point of view, it was far from being in order, arm or no arm. He was not given to adoration, but we had a little ginger kitten in London called Marmaduke, and for Marmaduke he had an exceptional tenderness; though not, apparently, immeasurable, for when the kitten strayed and disappeared and he wrote to me breaking the sad news, he remarked with absolute sincerity: "I'd have given two pounds for this not to have happened." Doubtless those of us who are more careless and extravagant in speech, but no more grieved than he, would have said: "I'd have given *anything* in the whole world for this not to have happened"; but Warrender had pondered on the matter, and then assessed his emotion at what to him was a high price, for he was the reverse of prodigal in expenditure, on my behalf as well as his own. When I had a visitor and told him I should want ice for the cocktails, he would repeat: "Ice, Madam?" and then reluctantly, "How many pieces?" Once, exasperated, I replied: "Oh, let's be reckless and have five." He saw no irony in this, and went to the door, repeating with deliberation, "Five pieces of ice."

The Informative section covers a wide range of letters. The

most meaningless of all, which probably not only I but everybody has received at some time or other, was from a temporary war-time bank-manager begging to inform me of the extent of my overdraft: "No doubt you will be sending a cheque, to cover it." As though—one would wish to have argued—as though one *had* any cheque except on the very bank where one already had the overdraft, which already, poor little stark shivering thing, required covering. The two words I suggest he should have left out to make sense of the matter, were "No doubt." . . . He *must* have had doubts!

Containing a piece of much more valuable information than this, was the Informative letter from an unknown reader in Minnesota, giving me the origin of the phrase "He gets my goat." She said she had it from the head of the Frontier Nursing Service of Kentucky:

For many years the breeding of fine racing horses in Kentucky has been outstanding, and as such blooded animals are very high strung and nervous it has been found that the presence of a small animal (usually a goat) in the stall with the horse has a quieting effect. Naturally when the horse is taken to Lexington for the Derby, the goat is also taken, and the surest way for an enemy or unprincipled rival to make the horse nervous and unfit for the races is to steal the goat. Hence the expression "gets my goat" when someone irritates beyond endurance.

I should hardly have supposed the goat (from what I have seen of them) to be an animal with a quieting effect on anyone or anything, but I do enjoy odd contributions to that endless miscellany of what I do not know and what I have always wondered about. Only yesterday I made one up out of my own head, but the authority in my voice put it over, I think, as a genuine piece of research. Someone was enquiring how the mother of Aladdin, a Chinese boy, came to be called the Widow Twankey? "Oh, don't you know? They had to find a plausible name for her in pantomime, so they originally called her the Widow of Tuan-Kee. . . ."

Another piece of information thrilling to an author—for what is



life without blotting-paper?—came in a letter to the village in Berkshire where I have a cottage: Was I aware that not far away stood the first mill ever to manufacture blotting-paper? I produced this item at a tea-party where we discussed what might have been the date of the discovery of blotting-paper? In Jane Austen's time they still sprinkled sand. Sophia had a bright theory that shortly after her accession, Queen Victoria may have said: "Come now, I mean to write a good many letters during my Reign and I can't be bothered with all this sand business," and set her men of science to work; and the mill was built shortly afterwards.

A piece of rather odd outlying information that I have unearthed from a heap of old letters, must have been sent to me by Humphrey in answer to a demand on my part for what term of abuse an Italian gentleman might hurl at an Italian lady living in sin. Authors do send out queer appeals for help. . . . I wonder what I was writing at the time? Usually I wrote to Humphrey, while he still lived in Italy, asking much more prettily about flowers and vines. However, he took it in his stride:

I have asked Don José, and he says that for a lady living in sin, Piedmontin would use "baggagia," which is both Italian and dialect and worse than "mantenata." He also says he might use either "putana," the usual word for whore, or "troia" which is slang for sow and is used for whore.

Searching through very old letters, one is amazed at the apparently haphazard rules of survival. Irrelevant correspondence dating back about twenty years has proved capable of terrific struggles through fire and flood (literally); through long journeys, and changes of residence, and a clearance of all but the most essential papers which precedes changes of residence; through loss and storage and war; through staying in other people's houses with no room for anything except what is absolutely vital. . . . And at the end of it all, looking as fresh as a daisy, out came a long letter written by me on paper stamped with the address of our house in Italy (where I had lived between 1923 and 1928),

quite unpretentiously dated "Friday," and beginning "My dear." I have not the remotest notion why it was so tenderly preserved, to whom it was written, nor, oddest of all, how it came to be back in my own hands again—unless it was never sent? I have hunted for clues through the text of four close pages; but though there are plenty, they will not add up to any result. "—So we can expect you at the end of December or beginning of January! Splendid! and not only for three days this time, please." First clue: she or he had already in the past stayed with us for three days and must have been a satisfactory guest or I would not have suggested a longer visit. "Panther comes to us in the middle of January; but much though I'd love to have you here together—*how* we'd talk shop—" Second clue: he or she was an author. "I'm afraid there's no room, now that our second spare-room has become a bathroom. It is a very beautiful bathroom, but the hot water supply is temperamental and has to be coaxed and stroked into obedience, or even humbugged into being hot by our airy pretences that we prefer it cold! I'm so awfully glad you liked *Tents of Israel*. All the critics have been darlings except—" The one exception had better be eliminated; he is still reviewing, and still not being a darling. But here was a definite clue, for *Tents of Israel* had been published in 1924. "The (original) Matriarch is having one of her most ramping and glorious 'bad tempers,' so hasn't settled down to read the book yet. When she does . . . !!!! (This is *not* for publication, by the way.)"

Little did I think that I would be publishing it myself, more than twenty years later.

"I'm not working very hard at the moment; I'm ankle-deep in manure, trenches, etc. *How* one gets absorbed in a garden, and how foolish it all looks to those without the garden instinct." News to me, that I ever gardened as ankle-deep as all that! "We've put in all our bulbs—over a thousand—and sown three wide herbaceous borders for early flowering. Now Piedmontin is making crazy paving; and all day long urges us, his minions, to collect flat stones for him, and all day long we don't! We had a

ripping holiday" ("ripping" dates it [and me] almost too clearly!) "up and down Austria and Hungary; and were especially intoxicated by Budapest"—or did I mean *in* Budapest? And then a lot of old-fashioned description of copper roofs and tzigane orchestras, with a sudden startling leap into intimate details about several of our mutual friends, their children, their honeymoons, and so forth, naturally censored from this record. We wind up with another clue: "I was awfully sorry too, not to have seen your cottage, but didn't want to rush it. I feel that one day, not too long ahead, I'll come and flop there for quite a long time and glut myself on England and Kent." Now who among my friends more than twenty years ago had a cottage in Kent that I did not want to rush? I give it up. If no claimant presently comes forward, it can go at last into the fire.

*Briefe die Ihm nie erreichten* (Letters That Never Reached Him): that volume in its English translation was a big hit when I was a child; I heard my parents and their friends excitedly discussing it, but of course I have no means of knowing now whether it was really as daring and as tragic as they thought, or just fit for the slop-pail. The rumour that thrilled them all, and may have been responsible for its best-selling properties, was that they were *genuine* letters which *genuinely* never reached "him." Another literary mystery to inspire much speculation along the same lines, was *An Englishwoman's Love Letters*, published anonymously; the secret came unstuck and they were proved to have been ingeniously composed by Laurence Housman.

I forget whether the publication of *Fräulein Schmidt and Mr. Anstruther* was before or after those two I have mentioned. It related in letters how Mr. Anstruther, a faithless Englishman (I seem to remember he was training, mistakenly, for the diplomatic service), went to stay in the house of Fräulein Schmidt and her father; the pretty German girl gave him his meals and taught him the language and became engaged to him; but he went away, and the one-sided correspondence, brave and gay and pathetic through disillusion, were invented by Elizabeth ("and her Ger-

man Garden") to draw tears from the great English public.

*Briefe die Ihm nie erreichten* . . . I have been turning "a letter that never reached him" over and over in my hands, strangely reluctant to open it; a large blank envelope which had been closed, reopened, and stuck down again with adhesive tape; the final effect reminding me of a story told me by a friend, of when her mother visited the village post-mistress in Cornwall, some sixty years ago, to say she had no objection to her opening their letters and reading them before she sent them round: "but please not to stick them up again as they look so messy."

No good postponing it any longer. After three years a letter should certainly be read and sent off to its overdue destination, or read and destroyed once for all. Or destroyed without reading. But not kept embalmed.

I had written it myself to a reviewer whose remarks had hurt me unbearably—not for their censure of my book, but for his summing-up and verdict on my life, of which he naturally knew absolutely nothing save what I myself had chosen to tell in three fragmentary and incomplete autobiographies. Without opening the envelope, but still holding it as though it were sentient, a body on which an operation had presently to be performed, I remembered exactly what had been his phrase which at the moment of first reading had made me feel that I must answer it or die. After some remarks on my resemblance to Nero fiddling while Rome burnt: "Now her fiddle is broken," he said, "she is at a loss what to do."

I tore the envelope open and read the seven pages wrenched from a note-book and scribbled over in my handwriting; they told me only one thing which I had forgotten: that on the day this review of *Trumpet Voluntary* had appeared, I had received an anonymous letter accusing me of exactly the same thing.

No, my reply had better remain a Letter that Never Reached Him. If I did not mind any more, if the raw place had ceased to throb and smart and tingle, I might have sent it off; or published it here in this chapter. But I did still mind; the place was still raw.

Then change the subject. Nero—why did he fiddle? Was he so absorbed in music? Had he simply not looked out of the window? Nero fiddling with frenzied, sadistic motions of the bow while Rome burnt has become one of those popular schoolroom anecdotes of history of which the details have never been filled in; and “nobody ever told us” is an excuse rather too fourth-form: “Surely, child, you can find out.” Who can I ring up, at once, 11:25 A.M. on a fine morning at the end of April, and ask them, without wasting too much time on preliminary chatter, why Nero fiddled while Rome burnt? Many Romes have burnt since then, and many Neroes have fiddled. I am not one of them. If these volumes of my personal memoirs carefully recorded all my pain and pleasure during the years, instead of deliberately leaving out the pain, for what reason would they therefore be judged a more noteworthy achievement by my critics? Would it do anyone a ha’porth of good if we spilt into print the unending fight we all put up against desolation and fear? I should deem it a sheer waste, lacking a great Myself to translate it into greatness. To which they might retort: “Then why not keep to fiction, if you must write, must earn a living; and leave self-expression alone? That is, if you honestly think so little of yourself.”

My answer is the huge packet of letters from unknown readers; without exaggeration twenty times more numerous for *Trumpet Voluntary* than for any fiction I have ever written; letters from all over the world, most of them from men in the services, British and American; nearly all sent off during a lonely period of acute nostalgia or suspense or wounds or interminable waiting. . . . Some curious accidental property of laughter or healing has apparently planted itself in this book which helped them through; their writing is informed with live gratitude. There can be no boasting about this, as there can be no credit. I am only as thankful as they, and more thankful, that I was used in this way; and that I had at least been compelled to hold back on the long, long revelation which might have convinced my critic that I understood the meaning of blood and tears . . . but could hardly have

brought me that letter from the woman who had read the book while a prisoner of war in an internment camp at Manila, and had handed it round to the others. This sort of letter is the best argument I have yet struck against authors committing suicide; they might or might not, if they decided to remain alive, write a book to bring temporary oblivion to an internment camp in Manila, but it would be a pity to murder the possibility.

By an odd coincidence, one mail brought me three letters, all from American sergeants, one in Texas, one in Burma, and one somewhere in France. . . . I went on looking through these packages of letters from unknown readers of *Trumpet Voluntary*, quieting the anger which I had so foolishly stirred up by opening and reading that sealed letter. Here was the last page only of a letter from a young R.A.F. bomber, an unknown correspondent no longer unknown; for I had met him two or three times while he was on leave in London: "I have a sudden but quite uncontrollable impulse to finish this letter by sending my love. I hope you don't mind." He was killed directly afterwards. I knew it when I read that simple ending to his letter; his sentences were usually wordy and elaborate, to conceal shyness. I imagine that he would not have broken his shyness unless he had had a sure presentiment that he would not be needing it much longer. . . .

Thither our path lies; wind we up the heights:  
     Wait ye the warning?  
 Our low life was the level's and the night's;  
     He's for the morning.

## CHAPTER XII "Dies Ere He Knows It"

Has there ever been a less stirring, more unromantic title for a great poem than "A Grammarian's Funeral"? Whether Robert Browning was aware of it and deliberately challenged the Skylark and West Wind School, the Daffodils and Gone-a-Maying School, we cannot tell. Certainly the blood remains stagnant when contemplating a grammarian; and that he and other grammarians should provide occasion for a funeral might have seemed in our school days an excellent notion of justice for what he had made us suffer. For grammar was a subject laid low in its coffin by such leaden words as "parsing," "predicate," "subjunctive," and "relative clauses." Yet Browning wrote:

Did he not magnify the mind, show clear  
Just what it all meant?  
He would not discount life, as fools do here,  
Paid by instalment.  
He ventured neck or nothing—heaven's success  
Found, or earth's failure:  
"Wilt thou trust death or not?" he answered "Yes!  
Hence with life's pale lure!"  
That low man seeks a little thing to do,  
Sees it and does it:  
This high man, with a great thing to pursue,  
Dies ere he knows it.

And at this point I would jilt the grammarian, and quote, if I dared, the whole of Stevenson's essay "Aes Triplex." If I dared. For indeed, the temptation to quote my betters, which has been pounding along behind me like the Hound of Heaven, draws nearer, catches me up at last, and I fear in this last chapter will

have me overthrown. Perhaps my vocation is for the making of anthologies rather than autobiographies. Nevertheless, I like to think that humility, not indolence, prevents me from seeking and setting down the imperfect phrase in my own fashion, when I cannot *help* remembering the very book, the very page where my masters have already perfectly phrased it. Had I not (metaphorically) been led to the high peak where Browning decided his grammarian was to be buried, it might have failed to occur to me that R.L.S., too, had wished he could be carried for burial to the summit of Mount Vaea; and his bier borne shoulder-high by native warriors, he splendidly gained his desire.

Well, here's the platform, here's the proper place.  
Hail to your purlieus,  
All ye highfliers of the feathered race,  
Swallows and curlews!  
Here's the top-peak, the multitude below  
Live, for they can, there.  
This man decided not to Live but Know—

Different from Stevenson, who decided not to know but live, and let knowledge take its chance.

Nevertheless, on re-reading Browning's poem, I am suddenly not at all sure whether indeed this grammarian had existed, or whether I had not been influenced perhaps by the reality of a similar procession that had wound its way up a mountain in Samoa, and interpreted literally what was symbolically meant?

Indeed it is a memorable subject for consideration, with what unconcern and gaiety mankind pricks on along the Valley of the Shadow of Death. The whole way is one wilderness of snares, and the end of it, for those who fear the last pinch, is irrevocable ruin. And yet we go spinning through it all, like a party for the Derby. Perhaps the reader remembers one of the humorous devices of the deified Caligula: how he encouraged a vast concourse of holiday-makers on to his bridge over Baiae Bay; and when they were in the height of their enjoyment, turned loose the Praetorian guards among the company, and had them tossed into the sea. This is no bad miniature of the dealings of nature with the transitory race of man. Only, what a chequered picnic



we have of it, even while it lasts! and into what great waters, not to be crossed by any swimmer, God's pale Praetorian throws us over in the end!

Stevenson's "pale Praetorian" presents an image of terror to chill the blood. Many of our writers have had the same instinct for the word "pale," to engender in their readers that desolate end-of-the-world emotion:

" . . . beauty's ensign yet  
Is crimson in thy lips and in thy cheeks,  
And death's pale flag is not advanced there."

The pale purple even  
Melts around thy flight.

Oh what can ail thee, knight-at-arms,  
Alone, and palely loitering

Thou hast conquered, O pale Galilean;  
The world has grown grey from thy breath.

Browning and R.L.S. met only once, at a dinner-party when the younger man was not yet famous, for he made an amused comment on his "lofty" encounters with various celebrities, Browning among them. It is, I suppose, simple of me to wonder at any two writers not instantly becoming great friends merely on a professional resemblance in their mental preoccupations; foolish to assume responsibility at the failure of their meeting, as though I were the hostess who had anxiously arranged the introduction, hoping, in a shower of platitudes, that all would go well. ("You two have so much in common!") But genius, they say, is unpredictable. And now that both are cold, it would seem more futile than ever for my will to try and force them into friendship. Yet truly they had much in common; both were intensely absorbed with questions of youth and age; *Virginibus Puerisque* and "Rabbi Ben Ezra." Stevenson, when young, desired to die young: " . . . pray for Medea; when she comes, let her either rejuvenate or slay." Browning accepted maturity and old age: "The best is yet to be, the last of life, for which the first was made." Each had

his wish granted, and of each might be said, since we are on funerals and epitaphs, what was said of my small friend David Addis, who at two and a half years was ceremonially awarded a prize for running, because "He ran valiantly—and in the right direction."

A few days after his fourth birthday, David showed unmistakable signs not only of his belief in the brotherhood of man, but that in carrying out this creed, deeds speak more emphatically than words. It was on a warm pleasant day just before Easter; his mother sat on a low wall surrounding a country churchyard, and wrote letters. She does not have to tell David to run away and play; he can always employ himself, sometimes by angel inspiration, sometimes prompted from a different source. The graveyard was gay with flowers irregularly massed wherever relations or friends had been able to pay recent homage to their dead. Presently, without looking up, Gil became somehow aware that a good deal of activity was going on. However, as long as David was good and happy. . . . Good he certainly was, and happy too, busily trotting to and fro, while in sing-song monologue he explained to himself or to the angels or to the King of Utopia, *why* he carried flowers from the graves where there were too many, to the graves where there were none at all. Altering, rearranging, moving the jars filled with water and heedlessly tilted over his own person, tidying the cosmos—

Suddenly Gil looked up. The levelling process was about complete, and David, the sun blessing his rough golden head, was putting the last touches. Every grave now was decorated in a blaze of flowers; above and below earth, thanks to David, all men were equal.

Appalled, his mother took him by the hand, and almost on tiptoe led him home by devious routes, covering their traces as they went.

I am always pleased to find that I have not yet climbed to that serene plateau where I can argue without furious indignation; that is, should the argument be on an impersonal subject; anyone can get angry in a personal argument, when we had far better retain our poise, our balance, our sense of proportion. But over impersonal things it reassures me to know that I can still care so much that detachment goes to hell. Which is where it went, when a man I know (that man-I-know was bound to crop up sooner or later, even if in the last chapter) asserted stubbornly that Eugene O'Neill was a greater dramatist than Thornton Wilder. I forget now on what he based his arbitrary pronouncement, except that he had a natural taste for those large smashing stumbling forceful sort of plays where huge unthinking creatures blunder about with clubs, destroying things; whereas I love plays where the forces that govern the universe are reduced in scale till the characters are individuals like ourselves, little recognisable people with meals and schools, families and weddings, disappointments and not very brilliant jokes and surprises and broken hearts; only one person dead at a time, and a hope of heaven to console those who are left. All of which sums up why *Our Town* is more my play than *Mourning Becomes Electra*.

*Skin of Our Teeth*, also by Thornton Wilder, less lovable than *Our Town*, is possibly a greater play because of its theme; which, transcending space and time, repeats the theme of man's indomitable survival, each time swung on an incredibly frail thread, after a devil's variety of attempts to destroy his chance for ever. I have never understood why so many people have declared, on reading or seeing the play, that they cannot understand what it is about? Surely the very title, the names of the characters and the events, set it forth clearly in black and white. For further simplification, the author lets one family represent us all. Barely escaping every catastrophe that human self-will must inevitably bring, Mr. Antrobus remains indomitable. In the end, which is also the beginning, for man's story as yet can have no end, he compels our respect; loses it when he becomes rich and insensi-

tive and a candidate for small-town honours, and wins it back again when the family creep out of their shelter after the World War, his one thought for the few books which, rescued from annihilation, again may beget in mankind the will to live: Aristotle, Spinoza, Plato, the Bible.

*Henry* [who is also Cain]: The first thing to do is to burn up those old books; it's the ideas he gets out of those old books that . . . that makes the whole world so you can't live in it.

Mrs. Antrobus represents the wife and mother of the race. Her loyalty is to her family, and nothing can ever wrench or break it. Perhaps she is the toughest of them all; tougher than Sabina, type of the eternal harlot who often triumphs and who can never quite be eliminated; yet Sabina's lure is brittle; lure, down the ages, of the woman expensively bought: the mistress, the *vi-vandière*, the tart, the courtesan.

And next enter the son, Henry Antrobus. There must always be a Henry in every family, for he is Cain: Cain the dream-killer, Cain the eternal warmonger. We imagine we would make any sacrifice to be rid of him once and for all. Yet from the first scene where he throws stones at his brother to obtain sole ownership of the wheel, to the last, when the World War is over for the moment and he tries to strangle his father for a thing Cain calls freedom (having his own way so that no-one else can have theirs), Cain will always be smashing among our plans and our hopes, denying us the sweet chance that sometimes plans may come true; denying us permanence and safety. My little lead statue of Cupid was no more safe, you will remember, when I took him down to my cottage and set him on the terrace by the stream to point his arrows at the softly stirring willows, than he had been among the falling bombs in the heart of London's air-raids; even here at Brambleford the bullocks from the meadow broke through the fence, galloped across the plank bridge, playfully knocked him over and battered him anew, breaking off one of his wings. Maybe they had not heard that peace was declared. A curious, ironic phrase, anyhow: *Peace is declared*; I first heard

it when I was eleven, at the end of the Boer War. I believed it then, and indeed it proved then to be more or less true.

A year ago, in the winter of 1947, when the Ice-age revisited England and the biting cold of February crunched the air, I sat in front of a magnificent fire which yet might have been merely the cardboard facsimile of a fire for the comfort it could give me; for it was the last of the coal, and though my next allowance was due and promised, it had not yet arrived. It was then that I realised that by some flaw in my nature, a fire today was of little use unless my ridiculous subconscious could be sure of a fire tomorrow; even the certainty of a fire not till next week or next month would have reassured me could I have been given the exact date and time of arrival. This fragment of self-enlightenment is of no importance except to show me that I and perhaps other human souls are still held by some persistent illusion that there can be such a state as "safety." I tried reminding myself how trivial were my fears and preoccupations compared with the dangers that had happened and easily might happen again, dangers that had passed and still left me warming my feet in front of today's fire. "Don't be a fool. (If I pulled half-a-crown from the air for the number of times I had adjured myself not to be a fool!) "Don't be a fool; you have a fire *now*, and the coal must come sometime; it's just that they couldn't say *exactly* when. Yes, but suppose it never arrives." The note of desperation rang a familiar chime. "Suppose they never come home"—when I lay in bed in my night-nursery, listening for the brougham to roll up the drive, bringing Mother and Father safely back again after they had been out to dinner or to the theatre. . . . "Suppose they never come home"—The panic went on till I was old enough to know better, all sorts of wild plans taking momentary shape and then breaking up again. I would wait till the church clock on Ladbroke Hill struck eleven. (It had just struck nine.) I would go on hoping, tense, feverish, alert at every sound of a horse clapping nearer. Then—oh, then I would get up and throw on a coat and go to the familiar cab-rank in Holland Park and see if I

could find a cab, and tell him please, *please* to drive to His Majesty's Theatre (remember to take my money-box) and to keep a sharp look-out on the route for signs of a terrible accident to a brougham. . . . Poor child! All those infantile "properties" of safety, the cab-rank, the money-box, the knowledge that they had gone to see Mr. Beerbohm Tree at His Majesty's! And younger still: "Suppose I'm never fetched," waiting for my nurse to be announced when other more fortunate children were already beginning to drain away, and echoes of "Good-bye, and thank you for a lovely time" still hung on the air. How *I* longed to be saying "Good-bye, and thank you for a lovely time!" Never fetched—Again I formed preposterous plans for coping with this anguish, though as soon as they were formed, my sense of proportion, even at that age, followed swiftly behind to inform me how fantastic they looked. Nevertheless, only the glorious fact of Father and Mother returning home, only the blessed arrival of "Gladys Stern's nurse," could bring a gasp of relief. Even now, how I should welcome a loud knock at the door, and a grimy messenger of salvation announcing himself: "The Coal."

And after all, were a child's terrified apprehensions so utterly without foundation? Fathers *had* inexplicably walked out of their homes and never returned; there *had* been fires at theatres and carriage accidents on the road.

Safety, protection, certainty. We had better build our houses without these supports; satisfied with coal in the grate, food in the granary, enough for today. . . .

And he spake a parable unto them, saying, The ground of a certain rich man brought forth plentifully:

And he thought within himself, saying, What shall I do, because I have no room where to bestow my fruits?

And he said, This will I do: I will pull down my barns, and build greater; and there will I bestow all my fruits and my goods.

And I will say to my soul, Soul, thou hast much goods laid up for many years; take thine ease, eat, drink, and be merry.

But God said unto him, Thou fool, *this night thy soul shall be required of thee*: then whose shall those things be, which thou hast provided?

I always used to quote those ominous verses from Luke as, "Thou fool, this very night . . ." and was astonished, on looking them up again, to discover that by one word inserted I had given death an even more imminent sound.

As the partridge sitteth on eggs, and hatcheth them not; so he that getteth riches, and not by right, shall leave them in the midst of his days, and at his end shall be a fool.

We can be certain of one law, and one alone: There always have been and always will be mathematically as many deaths as there are births; no more and no less; all down the ages they couple and tally in Noah's Ark parade.

In an earlier miscellany, *Another Part of the Forest*, I showed how the light-hearted technique of living in the spirit of the period, changed to a heavier discovery: "Wednesday fortnight *always* comes." The allusion crystallised into a phrase. I had accepted by telephone an invitation to do something or other which I did not want to do, or go to some place where I did not want to go; I accepted it because it was so far ahead that it seemed the way of least resistance to say Yes. "Wednesday fortnight? . . . Yes, all right." And to myself, carelessly, "Wednesday fortnight never comes!" But Tuesday fortnight came at a fast gallop, destroying the comfortable illusion. Wednesday fortnight *always* comes.

The wickedness of quoting from oneself can be measured by the depths of my guilt at the present moment. Bad enough, I have already remarked, bad enough to quote too profusely from my betters.

If we do not make up phrases to cover in shorthand our own lengthy processes of disillusion, we are left with ready-made catch-words and axioms, often using them for years . . . until we scrutinise them more closely, wondering whether what we have taken on trust may not seriously work out as a piece of sheer idiocy. "It's love that makes the world go round"—but that is about the one thing love does *not* do; the world would go round

on hate with a motion just as impassive and regular; love in its fullness can do everything else.

"It is later than you think"—menacing again as "Thou fool, this night"—though it depends somewhat on how the line is spoken, with a warning inflexion, or in casual reminder of closing-time in ten minutes, unless we hurry round to the local.

Once upon a time a man was brave to own himself irreligious, believing in nothing, refusing to go to church on a Sunday, not caring if his respectable neighbour spoke of him as godless and beyond the pale. Nowadays the whole attitude is reversed; nowadays it is far more exciting than it has been for hundreds of years, to see worshippers assembled in church of any denomination, because you can be fairly sure that not convention and not habit and not what-will-people-say has brought them there; so it must be that they are moved by honest belief, otherwise the fear of what people will say is far more likely to keep them away. "I'm going to church" has nowadays to be spoken with daring, a javelin hurled at apathy.

However, we gather that to couple intellect and atheism is no longer a matter of course; all fashion grows old-fashioned, and rebellion itself is rife against rebellion. We hardly imagine nor desire that the Fairchild family will return, nor the Reverend Theodore Pontifex, nor other tyrants of Victorian piety. Yet undoubtedly the flippant, witty unbeliever has ceased to be particularly amusing or effective; the state of things is a little too serious for that.

"Respectable" was in the Jane Austen period a synonym for decent behaviour; but since then it deteriorated to smug noises signifying expedience; gradually it is being raised again, like a royal standard that has lain too long in the ooze and the weeds. "Respectable": compelling respect for acts of integrity and courage and self-control.

The world is so full of a number of things over which we have no control; least of all, forgiveness. "I forgive you"—an arbitrary statement; not active like pardon, but uttered more in hope that



if one behaves without rancour, somehow isolating in our minds the injury done to us, presently a passive process will set in of its own accord; and that by the time our minds return to it, it will have been mysteriously drained of its poison and died of malnutrition. Otherwise, I cannot quite see what people mean when they say "I forgive you," or "Forgive and forget." Forget is even more beyond our control than forgive, so why promise? "Schwamm drüber," German equivalent for "Forgive and forget," means literally "Sponge over it"—wash it out. All one can promise is to forego the actual pleasure of whipping up remembrance and wrath; one can, so to speak, turn down the gas beneath it and let it cool. But for immediate functioning, "I forgive you" needs some divine equipment beyond human powers.

I hate questioners and questions; there are so few that can be spoken without a lie. "Do you forgive me?" Madam and sweetheart, so far as I have gone in life I have never yet been able to discover what forgiveness means. "Is it still the same between us?" Why, how can it be? It is eternally different; and yet you are still the friend of my heart. "Do you understand me?" God knows; I should think it highly improbable. (*Virginibus Puerisque*)

I am afraid that in my case forgiveness is almost entirely governed by the axiom that one person can steal the horse while the other may not look over the stable door. Most of us have our own special and particular get-away-with-murder friend; and though the murder may be too near the vicinity of your own heart to be pleasant, and you cannot forget it, and think you cannot forgive it either, you are likely to find (as I have, more than once) that it hangs on memory's wall like a picture with no live power to affect your relationship.

The things over which we have no control, what are they? Time and weather and memory and forgiveness and the bullocks in the field and our usually obedient dog when he scents a rabbit. Nearly everybody resents not being able to arrange the weather; it is a universal grievance which never dies from one century to another. The weather chooses to stay up there in some "unget-

atable" region, jeering at these brilliant and scientific inhabitants of our planet ("I say, *have* you heard today's forecast?"). It comes and goes, and moved by the season, graciously repeats its main effects from year to year, so that we can offer a timid: "It should be warm in June" or "cold in January"; but even then, in the main, weather is unpredictable: "Have you ever known it so hot in March?" or "July this year is exactly like winter." The cavemen must have made remarks of this nature; and though we of the twentieth century bolster up our helplessness by wise diagnosis like sun-spots and the Gulf Stream, the humiliating fact still remains that we cannot arrange a picnic without misgivings. If *we* had organised the world, we would have had the weather properly under control—so I have said myself, and often heard others say. An easy matter: rain at night because of the crops; fine by day because we prefer it fine . . . and also because of the crops. *Casus belli!* We have only to try a little imaginative speculation on what sort of a world would have ensued if every nation had its own way about the weather, and how many wars would be the inevitable result? An odd cause of thankfulness, indeed, that the weather, the gay, taunting weather, should be for ever placed beyond man's frontier control. Perhaps, in truth, its very waywardness may be a benison.

If matter is to serve as a neutral field it must have a fixed nature of its own. If a "world" or material system had only a single inhabitant it might conform at every moment to his wishes—"trees for his sake would crowd into a shade." But if you were introduced into a world which thus varied at my every whim, you would be quite unable to act in it and would thus lose the exercise of your free will.

(C. S. Lewis)

Nevertheless, discarding sense for sensibility, every spring I ache with the feeling that summer will soon be here, and then that summer will soon be over and I am not doing enough about it, not properly disposing my days that I may be able to enjoy its loveliness. Summer coming is already summer going: this may be my own form of chronic nostalgia, symptom all over

again of what's-the-good-of-a-fire-today-if-you-can't-be-sure-of-a-fire-tomorrow? Dispassionately, I should say it was a foolish symptom that should be discouraged, but I have not been able to get it under perfect control: nostalgia under control is, indeed, a contradiction in terms. Another symptom (or maybe the same one) on the first glorious day of spring, is a fear, usually too well founded, that no summer's calendar of events can live up to its impersonal enchantment. Do you remember the glorious incongruous weather during May and June of 1940? Yet, in truth, the dog days are inclined to be unbearable, unless one happens to be already a very happy dog when they arrive.

When John Taylor (the water-poet), in his "Verry Merry Wherry Ferry Voyage" announced that "the doggy dog days had begun to bite," apparently he was alluding to the hottest months of the year, July and August, dated according to the rising of bright Sirius (Canis Major), the Dog Star. Sirius has stood as the symbol of fidelity since ancient Egypt.

A legend from an unknown source tells how God created all the animals and Man as his masterpiece; then He suddenly got fed up with Man and said, "Let there be a chasm between this sickening two-footed creature and the rest of my animals." Dog stood on the edge of the ever-widening gulf, looking sorrowfully across; then with a mighty leap he cleared it and joined Man on his side, and there he has remained ever since.

I am never disposed to argue on the dog as the faithful friend of man; merely against the axiom that he is the intelligent friend of man. As a remarkable example of super-intelligence in a certain dog, a dog-lover told me that it had learnt to bark four times when you say: "What's two and two?" Proof unintentional of how very low we rate the brightest animal below the most normal human, that we can take up such an attitude of ecstasy and surprise at an accomplishment that every child of six learns as a matter of course.

Having come to this profound conclusion all by myself, conceit was a little aggrieved to discover that Chesterton had thought of

it before me. And for all the tenderness of St. Francis for his Brother Dog, he would still not have expected him to recite the multiplication table.

It is commonly in a somewhat cynical sense that men have said, "Blessed is he that expecteth nothing, for he shall not be disappointed." It was in a wholly happy and enthusiastic sense that St. Francis said, "Blessed is he who expecteth nothing, for he shall enjoy everything." It was by this deliberate idea of starting from zero, from the dark nothingness of his own deserts, that he did come to enjoy even earthly things as few people have enjoyed them; and they are in themselves the best working example of the idea. For there is no way in which a man can earn a star or deserve a sunset.

A guilty conscience seeks refuge in frequent apology. Perhaps if I were bold instead of rueful, I would take for granted your interest and ecstatic pleasure whenever another quotation loomed up on the page. When I happen to remember some particular passage from some particular book from some particular author, I so passionately desire to quote it for the benefit of my readers, for their enjoyment of the lucid thought and the felicity of phrase, that I cannot acquit myself of selfishness were I to keep it from them. So far, so good—or at least excusable. I then proceed to look up this particular passage, because I was always taught to verify. I read on or read back, as the case may be . . . and end by wanting to make you a present of the whole book, or at least of the whole chapter. That apparently is against the rules. (I can see why.) All the same, this said lack of control, this fierce temptation, this devil whispering in my ear, "Give 'em the whole works!"—his name, I swear for the second time, is not idleness; rather his name is Abundant Admiration; having had a thought or maybe a couple of thoughts to knock together, I would wish to send them scurrying like bride and bridegroom at a military wedding, down a lane of shining swords crossed overhead.

\* \* \*

There is nothing more comfortable to a spiritually-minded man than to muse and meditate on his departure hence into the blessed

sight of Christ in the other life. Yet to a worldling that would build up a rest for his body here, and sing a requiem to his soule in this vale of teares, nothing is more fearefull and hiddeous than for him to heare death spoken of. We must therefore examine our selves, whether we can sing a song of Sion in this exile and banishment, whether we can solace our selves, in hymnes and songs, of our ends and departure hence. For we must hence: nothing more sure; but the tyme when, the place where, and the manner how: nothing more unsure.

So William Loe wrote in 1620 to "his much respected good friend Mr. Thomas Barker one of the assistants of the worthy companie of the Marchants Adventurers." Being a merchant adventurer, Mr. Thomas Barker may have been in need of such admonition, for these merchant adventurers were boys who made swaggering plans and bore it ill when such plans were diverted or cancelled by the trifling matter of not knowing the time, the place, the manner of their death.

Yet indeed, without this last and supreme reason for thankfulness, neither life nor fellowship nor plans nor delight in change nor longing for safety could be at all possible; for if we knew the hour of our death, our eyes would surely be fixed in a sightless stare towards the allotted vanishing-point.

In a certain large, old-established school the rumour once spread that it was to be given up and the children sent home, though at a date unspecified. Belief in this (for it appeared to have come from an authoritative source) had naturally an extraordinary effect on their behaviour: some were stimulated by the idea to finer, swifter achievement; others, on the contrary, reacted in reckless disobedience to the rules, for what could it matter any more if the school were to come to an end?

I have not invented this as an effective parable, presently to be stressed by capital letters. It really did happen, and I made a note of it, thinking it might be an interesting story to work out if I could ever find time. . . . "If I could ever find time"—a strange phrase, as though a cache of time were lying somewhere about, hidden under flat leaves, buried in an old oak chest; extra time,

not the regular portions doled out to us in correct allotments of twenty-four hours.

A moment ago, I was caught in the pages of Chesterton's *St. Francis of Assisi*; with a mighty wrench I broke loose . . . yet have been compelled to return; for he has written too well on thankfulness, and thankfulness is my theme.

If another great man wrote a grammar of assent, he may well be said to have written a grammar of acceptance; a grammar of gratitude.

So Grammar comes into its own again, gratitude for its strange bed-fellow, and a magnificent funeral for the Grammarian.

Is it possible then for us to learn (as we are children, always learning) that we must be grateful for grammar? grateful for change? grateful for death? For change, hardest of all; our faith that change may be fair and fresh has lately been worn to a shred, and our efforts seem only to lead us to where we change the name and not the letter ("change for the worse and not for the better"). Constantly I find myself remembering a scene which ends the first act of *Our Town*.<sup>\*</sup> The boy is studying his algebra at the window in the moonlight, and his little sister Rebecca squeezes in beside him:

*George*: Get out, Rebecca. There's only room for one at this window. You're always spoiling everything.

*Rebecca*: Well, let me look just a minute.

*George*: Use your own window.

*Rebecca*: I did; but there's no moon there. . . . George, do you know what I think, do you? I think maybe the moon's getting nearer and nearer and there'll be a big 'splosion.

*George*: Rebecca, you don't know anything. If the moon were getting nearer, the guys that sit up all night with telescopes would see it first and they'd tell about it, and it'd be in all the newspapers.

*Rebecca*: George, is the moon shining on South America, Canada and half the whole world?

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*George:* Well—prob'ly is. . . .

*Rebecca:* I never told you about the letter Jane Crofut got from her minister when she was sick. The minister of her church in the town she was in before she came here. He wrote Jane a letter and on the envelope the address was like this: It said: Jane Crofut; The Crofut Farm; Grover's Corners; Sutton County; New Hampshire; United States of America.

*George:* What's funny about that?

*Rebecca:* But listen, it's not finished: The United States of America; Continent of North America; Western Hemisphere; the Earth; the Solar System; the Universe; *the Mind of God*—that's what it said on the envelope.

*George:* What do you know!

*Rebecca:* And the postman brought it just the same.

*George (impressed):* What—do—you—know!

Well . . . what *do* we know? Not quite enough, perhaps, to gabble breathlessly at the hour of our death, as we learnt when we were children leaving a party: "Goodbye, I've been fetched; thank you for a lovely time." It has not all been lovely, and little use pretending it has. Nevertheless, our persistent human hankering to be where we feel we belong, where we cannot be chased out into strangeness, for a safe, settled final *address*, might it not perhaps mean that Jane Crofut's minister was right to take no chances, even beyond the Universe?











